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THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT.

VOL. III.

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THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF

'PATRICIA KEMBALL,' 'THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS,'
'IONE,' 'PASTON CAREW,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BOOK THE SECOND.

(CONTINUED)

MIDNIGHT.

THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SHIPWRECK.

GONE! Gone like a stone in the water, like the path of a bird in the air. Gone, and no trace left by which to track her, no clue by which to find her. Had the earth opened and swallowed her up, or had a fiery chariot taken her to heaven, she could not have disappeared more wholly from the world, nor more completely have effaced her path. She had gone, and no one could say when, nor where, nor how, nor whether she had been taken by force or had gone of her own free will—whether she had been companioned or alone.

When Anthony came home rather late from his magisterial duties at that distant town, he found his household in consternation. Mrs. Harford, they said, had gone for a walk before luncheon and had not returned. No one had seen her save the nurse, who, as she passed the window—called into the inner room by the cry of the awakening child—caught a glimpse of her young mistress standing on the upper terrace as if looking at the view beyond. When she repassed with the child Mrs. Harford was not there. Save for this rapid glimpse, which told nothing, no one else knew of her movements. The gardeners and workpeople were at dinner; none of the servants were about; for the moment the place was deserted, and witness there was none. She had disappeared as if she had sunk into the central fire or had evaporated like a dewdrop into space.

No search, however careful, which Anthony instituted, came on the footprints of his lost love. The dragged pond, the netted river, the abandoned mines and disused quarries, the close inquiries after tramps and gipsies, the police

communicated with all through London and the large centres, the telegrams to Les Saules—nothing availed and nothing revealed. Not a trace remained of the woman who was more than the staff of his life to him; and he exhausted his imagination and broke his strong heart in vain.

He knew nothing of the return of Charlie Osborne to England, nor that he had suddenly left Kingshouse; still less that he had come to Thorbergh—called by a mysterious summons which left the door open for all possibilities of intrigue and romance to pass through—or that Mrs. Latimer's nephew had dropped down from the clouds on a visit to his old aunt. Who was to tell him all this? He had no casual correspondents at Kingshouse, and Mrs. Clanricarde had been as careful not to mention the fact of Charlie's return, in her letters to Estelle, as she was now to ignore it in her answering telegrams to Anthony. And if even he had known of this return he would not have connected it with Estelle's strange disappearance. He would not have suspected her of flight with her old lover.

That she could have deserted him, her child, her place, her honourable name of wife, her fair fame among women, for a girlish fancy that could never have justified itself by a serious union and the very existence of which he had almost forgotten—no; he would have needed overwhelming proof before he could believe her capable of this disgrace—she whose faults were surely not those of unbridled passion, carelessness of her duties, contempt of moral decencies.

He thought—and feared—that she might have killed herself in some fit of insanity following on the duller depression of her days. However much he tried to fight against it, in his heart he knew she was not happy. She was sweet and patient, but she was no more than this. Inert, dispirited, uninterested, he had to confess to himself that his power had failed, and that her heart was neither warmed nor won. His marriage was not a success. He had made heroic attempts to blind himself to the truth, and force himself to believe a lie. He had not succeeded. He had staked his all, and lost.

She was yet to win ; and the prize for which he had ventured everything was not his. Still she was not vicious. He had failed, but no other man held her. And she had not deserted him for another. She had not gone from him of her own free will at all. There was some explanation to this deadly mystery which would leave her as spotless as his love would have her—as nature had made her. She had gone ; but without wickedness or wilfulness—save such as might lie in a voluntary death.

By degrees he ceased to think that she had died. It seemed to him as if he must have known had she passed away from this world into that of the unknown. Something would have told him. Some whisper as of leaves faintly stirred by the summer wind ; some touch as of gossamer on his face ; some fleeting shadow passing before his eyes while the sun was shining bright and no cloud was in the sky—something would have brought him a mute message from the dread Beyond. She could not have died and given him no sign of farewell. It was impossible. And she was alive. She had gone

—and gone of her own free will. But some day she would come back. The mother's instinct would bring her, and the wife's love would re-awaken. Some day she would stand before him, drooping, penitent, sweet, and humble in her beauty. Some evening she would steal from out the dusky shadows, her hands outstretched, asking for reinstatement. And he would open his arms and gather her to his heart as lovingly as a mother would receive her lost child suddenly restored. No reproach, but only blessing should receive her—sweet words of full forgiveness, glad tears of frank reconciliation, the passion of joy that should turn away even her self-reproach. He would welcome her as the wintered earth welcomes the fresh young spring, and love her the more for the pain she had made him undergo.

And thinking this, one day he opened her desk for love to touch what she had touched, and there he came upon a hoard of girlish treasures—of withered leaves and faded flowers; a lock of hair; a ring; a photograph; some letters—all religiously kept as sacred relics embalmed

in perfumed paper—with dates and scraps of poetry; and everywhere the initials ‘C. O.,’ or the full name ‘Charlie,’ ‘Charles Osborne,’ or ‘my beloved,’ or ‘my darling.’

Then Anthony Harford took his revolver from the drawer where he always kept it, looked to the loading, and thrust it into his pocket. She should not suffer; but she should die. Her beauty should be undefaced, but she should no longer live to work ruin on men. He knew where to find her heart; and his own after. His revolver was trustworthy, and had been already baptized.

Meanwhile, Estelle lived closely hidden behind the curtains at Mrs. Latimer’s. It was the safest place, near to home as it was—safe as were those rooms above the prefecture for the murderer for whom the gens d’armes were in search. No one knew of her being there, and no one was likely to suspect. To outsiders, the house had changed in nothing, save that a young man, known to be Mrs. Latimer’s nephew, was occasionally seen going out and coming in. His being there made a little difference in the

supplies, and was sometimes commented on by the tradesmen, wishing to be civil and trying to be jocular; comments which Mary always accepted quite seriously, confessing to the lusty appetite of young men, and acknowledging that, my word, indeed it did make a deal of difference in the week's housekeeping! They managed, however, to do without extra help. Stirred by the need of the moment, the old lady threw off her chronic bronchitis and her debility as if she had been put through Medea's cauldron, and bustled about the house like a woman of sixty rather than of eighty. Only when the clergyman came for his usual godly ministrations had she a bad turn again; when she coughed like death, and was limp and helpless among the pillows in a darkened room. Else she was as brisk as any of them, and for a lady, as she was, showed herself wonderfully deft and handy at washing and scrubbing.

Estelle was too pre-occupied to notice this strange metamorphosis. She was grateful for the asylum that Mary and her mistress gave her, grateful for their sympathy and that they up-

held her flight and union with her lover as of all things the most natural—what might have been expected, and what was fair and just to all alike; grateful beyond all, and more than she knew how to express even to her own heart, that she had recovered the lost darling of life—the one sole beloved of her soul—the Sun-god whose eclipse had been the very destruction of all things good and gracious to her. She resolutely forgot all that was not Charlie. Her husband, her child, her parents, her whole existence of those last bitter years, all that was outside him, she put away from her as we put away the memory of our fever-dreams. She knew nothing of repentance, nothing of regret; and remorse would have been an infidelity of which she was incapable. Charlie was hers by the prescriptive right of love and time; and she had but gone back to her own and left the unlawful circumstances of the interval. Of all those circumstances her child was the only sacred spot, the only holy tie. And when the sound of its tender voice suddenly broke in on the ears we cannot stop—and its little hands

seemed to wander over her face, and its clear and wondering eyes to look into hers—she would fling her arms round Charlie's neck, and drown the remembrance of that thing which had been part of her very life, in floods of caressing words which he rolled back on her in sweet and full replies. For her husband she had no pity, no thought of even moderate regret. She looked on him as the executioner who had first deceived and then tortured her. It was only the child whose memory haunted her; and when that haunting and reproachful little spectre rose as from a murdered bed before her eyes, she did what she could to harden her heart by remembering that her child was also his—and that part which was his deserved no love from her.

So the time passed till the summer had gone and the winter was at hand; and then Charlie's health broke as once before, and the only chance of saving his life was by taking him to some warmer climate where he might live in the sun and forget the cold winds of the north.

Meanwhile, they had had one or two scares, as once, when Anthony Harford came suddenly to the house and Estelle had just time to rush up the stairs carrying her work with her. He heard the 'frou-frou' of her dress as it swept the stairs, but he was not enlightened. No mystery of subtle sympathy told him who it was. It was the swish of a woman's gown and the hurrying patter of a woman's feet—in all probability the servant's, fleeing as for dear life itself for a clean apron or a smarter cap. He was not a man to naturally note much of the ways or doings of servant-maids; but this rapid flight of the gaunt woman who served his tenant struck him as odd—and why did he think of it so much? It was strange how those sounds vexed his imagination, oppressed though he was with that load of unspoken sorrow and unrealized suspicion!

He paid Mrs. Latimer a long visit this day, and it seemed to her, acting her part—to Mary, vigilant and anxious, the sentinel under arms, the pilot never taking her eyes from the horizon—to Estelle, upstairs in her bed-room, with

the door ajar to hear the quicker and keener—to Charlie by her side, unarmed, but feeling that for her he would either slay or be slain—it seemed to them all as if he would never go. And, truth to say, to Anthony himself there was a strange and nameless power of attraction, which kept him talking to a half-imbecile old invalid in that darkened, stifling room he did not know why, but could not withstand. At last, however, he went. And when he left the house he stopped and stood in the middle of the street, looking at it curiously, and for a moment seemed about to re-enter. Another time a policeman came, looking at the scared inmates as if bristling with warrants for their apprehension. He was only charged with a message from the Sanitary Board relative to traps and overflows; and his visit passed as innocuously as Anthony's. While they were on hand, however, the fear was deep and great; and the sense of insecurity, always more or less confessed to the mind of each, gained additional clearness and predominance.

All these scares and fears were now at an

end. Secretly as they had come, unobserved of all, so secretly they withdrew—the fugitive wife and her childhood's lover; and no one knew the time, manner, or direction, nor who they were who took the midnight train to London and thence to the continent, so cleverly were all things managed and all traces obliterated. They were sufficiently furnished with money from what Charlie had saved and what Estelle had received for him. The old lady, too, pressed on them a substantial gift; and altogether they made up a purse more than enough for their immediate wants. And then they passed away into space, and Anthony, who had brushed by their hiding-place unawares, had no warning to tell him of the distance now between Estelle and himself, as he had had none to tell him of her close neighbourhood. Change of name; unbroken reticence on all their affairs, their relations, their home-status, their original roots; living to themselves wholly and mixing up with no one—by these means the two escaped detection and gave no cause for suspicion. They were simply

like any other people—a beautiful young married couple to be met with on the sunny days in the lonely places of the Riviera—known to the post-office and their landlady as Monsieur and Madame Charles—pitied as well as admired by all who saw them—for he looked as if he were what people call ‘struck for death,’ and she had a strange expression in her face as of one who was doomed and fated.

Only Mrs. Clanricarde had her suspicions, and only Mary and Mrs. Latimer knew the truth. But neither mother nor maid hinted a word of what the one thought and the other knew to Anthony Harford, eating out his heart in lonely anguish at Thrift. It was emphatically a case in which doubt was better than certainty. So both thought; and as they thought they acted.

Anthony would have no comfort. When Mrs. Clanricarde offered to go and stay with him—asked him to come to Les Saules—proposed to take the child, as indeed in a manner her right—he wrote back so ferocious a reply that the lady, courageous as she was, and pachyder-

matous to boot, quailed and shivered as if she had been struck by a steel whip. But she shrugged her shoulders and said with a high voice and a higher colour :

‘I will let him alone for the future. He is too impossible! I do not wonder that the poor, dear girl left him, such a bear as he is! But,’ she added, with the venomous concentration her husband knew so well; ‘if ever I see Estelle again, I will tell her in plain terms what I think of her disgraceful conduct. Cocotte! no better!’

‘Be merciful, my Louise,’ said that foolish George.

‘Merciful! to a woman who leaves her husband for another man!’ said Mrs. Clanricarde.

‘We do not know all,’ put in her husband meekly.

‘I, who have borne with you all these years, and have done my duty by you—be merciful to a daughter who leaves such a place as Thrift for a beggar like Charlie Osborne!’

‘We do not know that she has,’ her husband interposed again. ‘And am I such a bear

as the dear Anthony?' he asked with weak humour.

'No,' said Mrs. Clanricarde, tranquilly as to manner of aim but with plenty of poison on the arrow; 'you are not a bear, George—you are a fool; which is worse.'

Which candid avowal had the effect of shutting up that poor unlucky speculator, as it was intended it should.

At Kingshouse it gradually got to be known that Mr. Charles Osborne had gone to Thorbergh and young Mrs. Harford had left her husband simultaneously. Country post-offices are not always as safe as confessionals in the matter of telegrams, which isolated are suspicious, and combined are confirmatory; and these two things put together made a whole far too well-fitting to be ignored by folk with ordinary senses and the faculty for guessing riddles. The news went round in a whisper that soon deepened into an audible voice enough; but Anthony at Thrift heard no echo, and knew nothing of what was common property to many. He had by now given up the

search for his lost love. No inquiry had fructified in discovery, nor opened the narrowest path to the heart of the truth. If she had joined Charlie Osborne anywhere beyond the seas, time would be the avenger. Meanwhile, he must wait, like the captain left alone on the wreck—all else lost and drowned.

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN.



CHAPTER I.

BY THE SEASHORE.

Two young people were sitting on a bench facing the sea and under the shadow of the ilex-trees. At a little distance, concealed from view by an intervening rock, but within ear-shot, two others, farther in the wood, had found their place on a heap of stones brought down by the winter torrents, and left there as a foundation for fragrant plants and shallow-rooted flowers. They were sitting hand-in-hand close together—radiant with the glossy happiness proper to a bride and bridegroom satisfied with each other and themselves. He was gallant, tender, caressing, and she was a little shy, a little silly, and, as it might be sur-

mised, abashed, fluttered by her own sensations.

The two on the bench, in their turn, were sitting close together, hand-in-hand. But there was no flutter about them, if much tenderness; and their love had not the gloss of newness, but rather the mellow depth of tone which comes from the ease of accustomedness and from length of time. They were sad rather than radiant. He was thin and hollow-eyed, with sunken cheeks of burning red, and with a cough that told its own tale. She, too, was thin and hollow-eyed, but her malady was not the same as his. What was active disease in him was reflected sorrow in her; and if he could have been made whole she would have become robust. Such as they were, however, they sat together close—close—hand-in-hand like those who knew that they must soon part for ever, and that only little of life was left them for love.

Said the good-looking young bridegroom on the heap of stones, with his clean-shaven face, save for the delicate moustache which he caressed lovingly :

‘And you really think this better than Kings-house, Annette? You do not regret your fatal step?’

‘You silly boy,’ answered his companion with an embarrassed little laugh. It would be impolite to call it a giggle.

‘But tell me, do you? I begin to think you do. Tell me, my pretty birdie, do you regret it?’

‘How can you be so silly! Yes then, I do. There now!’ was the reply.

‘Now you must do penance,’ returned the young man. And, after some scuffling among the dry twigs and loosening stones, a few curiously stifled ‘don’ts,’ and as curiously-checked laughter, the penance was duly performed, and peace was re-established between the contending parties.

‘I wish mother was here to keep you in order,’ said the girl, as she settled her hat which had got a little awry during the passage-at-arms.

‘Do you?’ was the answer, made drily enough. ‘I cannot say that I do, much as I love the dear old lady.’

‘Old! Meddy!’ said Annette, in a tone of reproach. ‘Why, she is not fifty yet! That is one of the funny things at Kingshouse—none of the dowagers are old. Even the countess is not what you might call old; and she is the most ancient of them all.’

‘No, I grant you they are a fine set of matrons,’ said Meddy. ‘Upon my word, the last time I saw your special love, Mrs. Clanricarde, she looked about thirty. She is a wonderful get-up, I must say.’

‘Oh! but she paints and dyes and does all that,’ said the bride, who four days ago was Anne Aspline, and now was Mrs. Medlicott. ‘So no wonder she looks young, made-up as she is. I wonder what has become of that dreadful Mrs. Harford,’ she added, after a pause. ‘Fancy any well-brought-up girl leaving her husband and baby for another man, and such a man as that dawdling, affected, good-for-nothing Mr. Osborne. It is really too dreadful! Such an awful shame!’

‘But it is not quite sure that she left. You know it was thought she was killed,’ said the

former curate of Kingshouse, now a full rector on his own account. A gentle kind of deprecation was in his voice. He was an amiable young man, and did not like to hear ill-natured things said of women. He was not so careful of hirsute, muscular men; but women, especially when young and pretty, he defended and pronounced 'sacred,' holding them to be the chosen vessels of grace and goodness. 'You see, no trace of her has ever been found, and all that we can say is but surmise.'

'They both disappeared at the same time, so of course they went away together,' returned Anne, a little doggedly. The Clanricardes were the reddest of all the red rags in her mental store-closet. Good-natured to everyone else, to them she was implacable. 'We all know how madly in love with each other they were, and how Estelle hated her marriage with that awful bear—I don't blame her for that!—and how Mrs. Clanricarde manoeuvred the whole thing and put that advertisement in the paper and all that. So how could it end but as it has?'

‘Assuredly logic and sequential reasoning do not make part of my wife’s mental furniture,’ thought Mr. Medlicott, while he caressed his moustache with one hand and held hers with the other. ‘Tell me, Annette,’ he said suddenly; ‘did that Harford man ever make love to you?’

‘I don’t know about making love,’ said Anne with a girlish laugh. ‘He wanted to marry me, if that’s what you call making love!’

‘The scoundrel!—how dare he!’ cried the bridegroom with affected indignation. ‘I shall have to break his head for that!’

‘If you intend to break the heads of all who liked me you will have enough to do, sir,’ said Anne, bridling.

‘Confess, little wretch—“excellent wretch!”’ said Mr. Medlicott. ‘How many? Who? Tell me, that I may make a note of them all, and punish them as their presumption deserves. Begin the roll-call. Lord Eustace?’

‘Well, yes; Lord Eustace liked me very much,’ said Anne bravely. ‘I was always exceedingly careful, though, not to give him any encouragement, for I did not care about him

personally, and I had no fancy to be the wife of a lord who had not enough money to keep a house properly. So I always cold-shouldered him, poor fellow! And so I did Mr. Osborne, who at one time was very sweet on me. I could have got him away from Estelle Clanricarde if I had liked. But I always despised him, and would never have anything to say to him.'

'Perhaps that monster of the money-bags, that gnome of the mines, Mr. Stagg, looked at you with those calf's eyes of his, and presumed to think you fascinating and delightful?—as you are,' continued the gallant bridegroom, going on with his interrogatory.

'He!' said Anne, with something like a scream. 'No, indeed! I would have made him remember it to the last day of his life if he had! No. Lady Elizabeth may take him now that Estelle Clanricarde cannot have him. He is rich enough to buy even Lady Elizabeth, if he likes.'

'I suppose now that old Stagg is dead he has an enormous income?' said Mr. Medicott.

'Enormous!' continued his wife. 'I don't

know how many thousands a year! Far more than he will know what to do with. What a shame that such a creature should be so rich and others so far his superiors so poor! For instance, the Kingshouses themselves—for indeed Lady Elizabeth is a noble creature!’ she added, her natural good-nature breaking through the ill-tempered crust by which the Clanricarde eidolon was surrounded.

‘But I fancy the poor monster is not a bad monster at heart,’ said the apologetic bridegroom. ‘He is queer, but he is a good fellow when you get at him.’

‘Perhaps,’ was the reply. ‘He is so very dreadful to look at that one can scarcely believe he has any good in him; but he ought to have, poor fellow, for compensation, if for nothing else!’

‘The law of compensation obtains everywhere,’ said Mr. Medlicott loftily. ‘Without it we could not reconcile human life as we know it with the benevolence of a superintending Providence. That we know to exist; hence, logically we must have the law of compensa-

tion to redress the overweighted balance and make the uneven things come right in the end.'

'Yes,' said Anne, giving his hand a little squeeze. 'How beautifully you talk, Meddy! How I love to listen to you when you say such things as these!'

On which the two went off into the lovers' paradise of babble, silliness and mutual flattery; and the listeners on the bench facing the sea got up and slowly walked back on the narrow mountain-path by which they had come.

They walked on in silence as they had sat, hearing all that had been poured forth by the former somewhat over-disdained antagonist. Estelle's pale cheeks were paler still; Charlie's had a yet deeper flush. They were so entirely all in all to each other—so shut out from the world and society—they had as it were forgotten the existence of those who knew their story. Love which had united them had also been their high priest; and to neither her nor to him was it as if they were living in sin or defying the laws. The sin had been her marriage; not now in their love; and her husband had no righteous cause of grief

against her in that she had left him. She alone had the right to complain in that he had ever taken her. This was their normal state of feeling—the child lying as a secret, unnamed, kind of terror between them ; but when they heard the talk of Anne and her husband they realized to the full the position in which they stood, as the world saw it and judged of it. They were the guilty pair in those mournful regions which the great Florentine traversed—they who had lost life and fame for that one tremulous kiss. Never separated, ever loving, they too were miserable in the hell which they would have said, when living, love would make a heaven. And these two young people, who also had lost all that makes life honourable among men, for the love that had been denied them and the faith of which they had been cheated, were no more happy than were Francesca and Paolo, when Dante fell as fall the dead for pity of their story. The Nemesis we cannot escape, flee as fast as we will, was creeping up to them daily nearer and nearer. They had Love as their high priest, truly, but Death was to be the Avenger ; and

now they both, at least for the moment, understood the dishonour which surrounded them as things were, and which would close still more closely round Estelle when he had gone.

‘I have been a brute. I have been awfully selfish,’ said Charlie, suddenly breaking the silence which had been so eloquent between them. ‘I was carried away by the passion, the despair of the moment ; but I should have had more self-control—I should have resisted you and myself too !’

‘Hush !’ said Estelle, called back to herself as his only, and not as any other’s to hold or disdain. ‘I cannot bear you to say that, Charlie. I would rather be with you than be the queen of the world. Do you think I care for what such a silly, weak-minded girl as Anne Aspline says ? Do you think the blame of such a creature as that touches my love for you ?’

‘Your devotion does not make me less a selfish brute,’ said Charlie, tears in his eyes and voice.

She took his hand and carried it to her lips.

‘When I complain then blame yourself,’ she answered with infinite grace and tenderness.

‘But when I am dead, Estelle, who will you have then to love and care for you; to protect you; to make your life tolerable to you? Then you will find out to your sorrow all that you have lost for me, my poor unselfish darling; and I shall know it in heaven and be unhappy in vain.’

‘I shall want no one,’ she said. ‘If you die, Charlie, I shall die too. So that need not trouble you here or in heaven. There is no one I should care to live for—no one whose love I would value if I had not you. No one!’

She slightly shivered as she said this. The image of the child she had left and abandoned to the care of a hired nurse, whose temper and heart she scarcely could guess and certainly did not know, seemed to form itself before her from the crossing threads of the radiant atmosphere—like a cloudy shape just there within her grasp. But she shut her eyes and put the thing resolutely away; and felt as if she had killed

something tender and beautiful, as she always did when this thought possessed her—this image appeared—and she would not receive it. Her tenderness was in vain, at least for the moment. Charlie would not be comforted. His conscience was aroused, and not all her assurances could lull it to sleep. Death was upon him, and he knew it; and perhaps the nearness of that great revealer—that light of knowledge which comes from the open grave into which we are about to descend—showed him to himself as he was in all his intrinsic egotism, and not as he had fondly believed during all these years of self-flattery and self-complacency. But it was so painful to Estelle to hear these self-accusations, that for very love and pity for her he ceased. He was her idol, and the god enshrined in him was the dearest of all in the Pantheon. To find aught in him less than perfect was blasphemy, even from his own lips; and she cared more that he should be happy than clear-sighted. So the little flame of righteous severity that had blazed up in his soul died down again, put out by the breath of her adoration; and they went

back to their normal attitude of perfection on his side and devotion on hers—and by reason of that perfection and his love for her, his worthiness of all the sacrifice she had made.

After this unintentional eavesdropping, however, a certain nameless something came over both Estelle and Charlie. It was not that they loved each other less, but they were even more unhappy than before—and unhappy in a different way. Something beside the sorrow of that all too certain separation was on them—something that stung him, and that made her as it were timid and in one sense reserved. They had lived in the fool's paradise of love and had forgotten the world without. Now, Anne Aspline's words had brought them back to the consciousness of the life that was beyond and without their own, and to the laws they had broken. But Estelle fought the most vigorously against the new spirit. She had not the same kind of self-reproach as that which haunted her lover. She had done him no harm ; and her own sin she would bear for his sake. But the sorrow that was over the dying man was hard

to see and impossible to remove ; and she was often like one who has already gone down into Hades, where no light is and no joy can live.

CHAPTER II.

THE FINGER OF SCORN.

THE last three days had been sultry and oppressive. Not a breath of air stirred the sensitive leaves of the olive ; not a ripple ruffled the deep blue waters of the sea. The birds ceased to sing, but chirped incessantly and flew hither and thither as if restless with some alarm. Some dogs howled and some barked, but without apparent cause ; some, again, lay speechless and drowsy ; and others were on the alert, scenting imaginary game and sniffing curiously at all cracks and crevices. Horses were either restive or sullen ; and when they did not plunge and kick they jibbed and refused to go. Those who knew these signs looked anxious, as men fore-

seeing a catastrophe. Those who did not, merely grumbled at the heat, fanning themselves in vain for the coolness they could not catch. Invalids suffered more than usual, and children cried without cause. All nature seemed distressed, and where there was no distinct apprehension there was vague uneasiness.

On the third day all these signs had increased in intensity. One would have said that some viewless Terror was hovering in the air over the mountains and the seaboard. The stillness was appalling. That breathless pause before the mortal throe seemed to hold all life in suspense. And then came the moment. Strange noises were heard in the earth like underground thunderings or the muffled roar of an imprisoned creature in wrath and pain. The trees swayed as if a mighty wind had stirred the branches and loosened the roots. The solid earth quivered and rocked. Huge boulders detached themselves from the mountains and fell thundering down the sides, carrying with them avalanches of smaller stones, crashing and destroying all before them. Houses fell into ruins as if

pounded into heaps of dust. Here and there the earth opened and engulfed fields and farms and orchards where it was riven asunder ; while over all the tumult rose the voice of human agony, going up to the pitiless heaven in one great cry that was half a reproach to the Force which hurt, and half a prayer to the Power which could save.

The dwellers on the mountain slopes and in the upper valleys suffered more than those of the seaboard and the plain. Villages were wrecked in their entirety, so that not a house remained standing where there had been happy homes and flourishing farmsteads, and all the fine results of human activity and intelligence. From under the ruins came voices of complaint and pitiful entreaties for help. Here and there a limb, left uncovered by the mass of stones and masonry which had crushed the rest of the body, told the sobbing searchers that the father, the mother, the child, the spouse, lay buried there, slain in this great convulsion which had destroyed so much beside. It was a time of universal wailing, and there was not a family

which had not lost in love or in gear—and almost all had lost in both. The people, panic-stricken, and in a manner paralyzed by their terror, rushed for safety to the churches. Here, at least, was a holy refuge from the Wrath that was upon them. The Hand of God would spare His own house—and the priest, His interpreter, would stand between them and the doom threatening to overtake them all. But the church was no safer than the cottage. It fell; and in its fall priests and penitents alike were sent to their last account, unconfessed and unabsolved. Then the last ray of hope was quenched in the hearts of the simple folk who still believed in spiritual nostrums against physical disaster; and some sat down among the ruins as if turned themselves to stone; and some fled shrieking through the olive groves and chestnut woods—or, if not shrieking, then laughing with that wild, maniacal laughter which is worse to hear than sobs and groans.

Down on the seaboard, where the strangers from far-off lands congregated, things were bad, but not so bad as higher up in the hills. Here

there was, on the whole, more fear than damage. Hotels shook and cracked but did not fall; and the invalids who had come here for the sunshine of the sweet South, suffered more from terror and exposure than from actual bodily hurt. A few seasoned travellers and cool-witted philosophers remained quietly in bed, where the shocks found them; but for the most part the inmates of those motley caravanserais streamed out like a flock of startled sparrows, and some among them gave that comic element to the scene which by contrast deepened the tragic. Of these a certain few never got over the exposure of their nude and undressed faces. The beauty of the evening, thirty at the outside, now appeared as she was, the faded wreck of fifty; and the well-set-up young man, who passed for less than forty, now showed as more than sixty. Wigless, toothless, rougeless, patent and confessed for what they were—for the most part draped in blankets and crazed with terror—they, when they came to their right senses, never forgave Nature the shabby trick she had played them, but disappeared from the scene by

noonday like the ghosts which vanish at cock-crow. And side by side with these exquisite Polichinelles were the invalids who came forth to die ; and the young, fresh, unspoiled human flowers who had no cause to fear the revelation of the sun nor to shrink from the confession of themselves as they were.

Among these were the 'two young lovers lately wed'—Anne Aspline and her husband, Mr. Medlicott. Frightened, as she assuredly was, Anne had yet not lost her nerve to the extent of appearing in such unbuttoned *déshabille* as many. She had found time to put on her shoes and stockings, and to fasten her morning gown with all its bows and streamers. Her hair was decently coiled about her small head with the ears like jug-handles ; and, in the curious medley of the unmasked and the undressed, she and her husband had a quite refreshing air of order, cleanliness, and British propriety. Anne was no more indifferent to earthquakes than the rest, but she dreaded the loss of her clean, smooth, well-conducted propriety more than the loss of life itself. Had she had to

repeat Virginia's choice, she would have followed Virginia's example, and have chosen a decent drowning rather than a nude salvation.

Sitting there in the garden, well out of the risk of danger from the walls—should they fall like those of Jericho at the sound of a more formidable trumpet than Joshua's—facing the sea, which now was strangely agitated and mud-coloured—not blue—Anne and her husband talked together, as everyone else talked, of the solemn facts of the hour. But where she was mainly interested in the hours when the trains would leave for Paris, he delivered himself, for the advantage of those within hearing, of that essentially clerical philosophy which tries to reconcile the blind, the irresistible, the indiscriminating action of cosmic forces with the careful superintendence of a personal Providence looking after individual interests. It is a philosophy which has all the soothing effects of a repetition of 'Mesopotamia;' and Mr. Medlicott soon gathered round him a small audience of those who attended the English church regularly on the Sundays, and went as regularly to Monte

Carlo all the other days of the week. It was quite a triumph for the handsome young clergyman with the military air. His discourse betokened so many valuable qualities. Presence of mind, physical courage, sublime faith, scientific knowledge, and that intimate acquaintance with the Divine Will which endues a man with ambassadorial functions—all these were manifest in the young clergyman's harangue, and made their mark accordingly; while Anne, in her turn, set an example of neatness, propriety, self-respect and feminine modesty, not without its value in the midst of the buttonless and unbraced crowd, which had but one sentiment—that of craven personal fear.

The hotel-keeper, with whom the exigencies of his position had conquered his own private alarm, was beyond measure grateful to these two young people who set so good an example and did so much to tranquillize the frightened crowd. He came up to them and thanked them warmly—taking them by the hand—kissing madame's with an effusiveness that made Anne blush deeply, though conscious that such fire

as might have been in that fervid salute was, as it were, extinguished by the tears which stood in those large soft Southern eyes and fell down those large soft pendant cheeks. All danger was past, he said; there would be no more shocks. He knew the signs, and they had passed the crisis. He spoke with quite as much confidence as the young clergyman; and he had some good effect on his hearers. Spiritual assurance and practical experience together worked a miracle of mental healing on these distracted folk. Men began to laugh and pretty women to giggle, while a few of the more courageous stole back into the hotel to adorn themselves as usual, and to make sure of their valuables, left open to pilferers in the haste of the moment. And while they were all dispersed in this wise, there came two more shocks as violent as the first had been, and the whole scene of terror and distraction was enacted anew.

The recurrent shocks finished the ruin of the upper villages, and sent the inhabitants moaning to the plain and seaboard. Such visitors as had

taken houses for the season in the upper valleys suddenly found themselves homeless, and were forced down with the rest. There was no bivouacking on heaps of stones and rubbish for decent people accustomed to luxuries ; no camping out under the canopy of the skies for invalids whose chests were unsound and whose coughs were resonant. Hence, as the seaboard had suffered less than the valleys, the dwellers in these last came down to take their chance of future ruin—at all events, a more favourable chance than their own. By the late evening, however, everything was quieter. There had been no more shocks since the early morning ; the abnormal appearances of nature had passed, and the beasts and birds had returned to their usual habits. The more timid of the visitors had taken flight for lands where earthquakes are unknown ; and things wore more their everyday appearance. There were always the ruined houses and the sobbing multitudes whom the wreck had plunged into abject poverty—always the traces of that dread infliction which the clergy said had been sent by an angry

Deity as punishment for sins; but a little external order had come back over the face of chaos, and Anne and her husband had mainly contributed to the human part of it.

They were sitting in the same place as before, in the garden facing the sea, and surrounded by the same admiring audience. Mr. Medlicott was in his true element, and Anne shared in the triumph of her husband. Providence had been so kind to them! Down there on the road were groups of desolate men and bereaved women—families face to face with famine—husbands who had lost the women they loved—mothers who themselves had dug out from the wreck the maimed bodies of their children—lovers parted for ever from the beloved—every kind of suffering, every form of woe—to the strong man maimed for life and the woman rendered imbecile till she dies. Of these no account was taken in the sum of gratitude for individual preservation. That the Divine Hand had pressed heavily on these was one matter; that it had not crushed themselves, but had, instead, sustained and protected, was another.

The troubles of others did not cool the fervour of the young clergyman's discourse, by which he raised the hearts of his hearers and brought tears of gratitude to their eyes.

He was at one of the most moving passages of his extra-official thanksgiving, when a hired carriage drove through the gate and up to the house door. It contained a young man and woman with a very slender amount of luggage and as small a stock of health. He, indeed, was dying; she, as evidently fragile and broken-hearted, had yet a strangely resolute look in her gentle face, giving the impression of one keeping up by force of will for a special reason and a definite time—and then? They were among those whose habitation had been wrecked by the earthquake; and they had been the whole day foodless, helpless, strained—unable to find a conveyance to take them down to the hotels on the seashore, and with but little left of their modest possessions. They had scarce enough, indeed, for current needs; and what money they had was buried in the ruins. Still, they must live—and there was always that old

friend and her no longer mysterious mistress to fall back on. The landlord of the hotel, who had lost fully half of his guests, was glad enough to see this new arrival, unpromising as it looked. He took in the situation at a glance ; but these English milords have inexhaustible supplies in their own country, and a day's accident is not a life's disaster. He was welcoming the young people in his best manner when the group in the garden broke up. It was time to come in to dress for table-d'hôte. Besides, that extraordinary curiosity which possesses all English people abroad, drove them to inspect these newcomers and form conjectures as to their condition, status, history, and the like.

Last of all the little crowd filtering through the door, came Mr. and Mrs. Medlicott—he, sedately jubilant because of the good words he had said, the good seed he had sown, and the impression he had made on hearts not always too ready to receive such wholesome touches ; she, proud of her husband, and feeling a certain national pride as well as spiritual satisfaction in the testimony he had just borne.

God had verily been good to them, and it behoved them to be grateful! As they passed through the doorway into the hall they stood face to face with the new arrivals. Charlie, pale and half-fainting, was sitting on the hall settee, coughing in the intervals of returning consciousness. Estelle was beside him, holding his head against her breast. The clean and well-regulated soul of Anne revolted at this rampant impropriety. Her whole being cried out shame and repudiation. She felt it to be impossible to stop under the same roof with these hardened sinners—these unmarried lovers who bore their iniquity so unblushingly. All the pride that she herself had in her lawful wedded state seemed to sink into the mire—to fall to the base level of this illegal union. If these creatures—this adulterer and his concubine—were received on an equality with herself and her consecrated spouse, where would she stand? and would it not be an insult to herself and to her pure and holy state? And beside and beyond these rushing thoughts of indignant propriety was one in the background of her consciousness—not ac-

known, not recognized, but none the less there. It was the scorned woman's natural desire for revenge when the tables are turned, and she who had once held herself too high for association is now fallen—fallen into the depths where she may be spurned and scourged and driven forth by the one whom formerly she repudiated.

No sense of pity stirred the white soul of the once pure maiden, and the now no less pure because the lawful wife. No human instinct of compassion for the dying man, of sorrow for the agonized woman, weakened the holy wrath of spiritual condemnation which possessed her with almost prophetic power. She—Anne Aspline, usually so quiet, so unobtrusive, so undemonstrative—left her husband's side, and with the air and manner of an indignant pythoness, pointing to the two sitting there in their misery, said to the landlord in a loud voice :

‘If you take these two unmarried people into your house, I and my husband will leave it.’

Had a thunderbolt fallen or another earthquake shaken the house, the consternation of all assembled would not have been greater. The

hall was full of servants and visitors, glad of an interruption to the sombre events of the day, and to all, Anne's voice—clear, vibrating, raised high in the passion of her protest—came like a silver trumpet from the altar.

‘They are not married,’ she repeated; ‘and that woman has left her husband and her child.’

A murmur of reproach ran through the English. The native servants, however, looked at one another with a shrug that said: ‘What of that! Monsieur is dying, and madame is beautiful!’

Only one English person ventured on compassion. This was a woman, no longer young in years but still young in heart, and she went up to Charlie and Estelle, and, ignoring what had been said by Mrs. Medlicott, asked them with infinite kindness if she could be of any use to them? and what would they do? where would they go? For the hotel-keeper, driven to the necessity of choice, had, wisely for himself, determined to keep the two who already had done his house some good, and whose departure would probably draw others away—and had

told these poor young new-comers, without too great expenditure of courtesy, that they must leave now on the instant—he would not give them rooms.

‘There are other hotels,’ said Estelle with all her old quiet dignity.

She neither failed nor blenched. This small spite of the former cook’s daughter fell from her as something utterly unimportant. Side by side with her darling’s state, what mattered it, or aught else? She was only sorry that she had to go forth to find another place. He was too fatigued already. But even that must be borne, and bravely.

‘Your poor gentleman looks too ill for much exertion,’ said the lady.

‘I would not stay here with that woman if I could,’ said Charlie, with a sick man’s petulance. ‘Come, Estelle, let us get out of this place. It is pestilential, with that creature here!’

He spoke too feebly to be heard beyond those immediately beside him; and both Anne and her husband lost the words which, had they heard, would have added fuel to the already

raging flames. As it was, Mr. Medlicott was left free to regret the somewhat over-harsh Puritanism of his wife. Though not specially large-minded, he was of a broader and more generous mental build than Anne; and on such a day as this, when all of human life and ordering had been so tossed and wrecked, he thought he would for his own part have kept silence over those missing marriage-lines, and have given the dying man peace and a place of rest. But he could not rebuke his wife, neither before folk nor in their private room—though he thought her purity too hard and too aggressive. Still, purity is such a necessity for woman!—better have it in excess than not enough. And yet—and yet—his heart went out to those desolate transgressors. That poor fellow was so evidently on his last legs, and Estelle was so infinitely lovely and so pathetic in her beauty.

But nothing could be done. The thunder-bolt had been launched and the consequences must be submitted to. Kindly helped by the porters to whom the master made a sign, and accompanied by the lady who had spoken to

them, a certain Mrs. Ellistone, the two poor banished and outraged exiles—these descendants of the peccant pair who ate the forbidden fruit—went slowly out into the chill dusk of the dying day to seek for an asylum where there was no Anne Aspline to denounce them, and where their certificate of marriage was not asked for.

But all through that weary night there sounded in Estelle's ears the murmur of virtuous abhorrence and the rustling as of the drawing away of skirts which had greeted the damning announcement that she was no wife, but an adulteress and a concubine—a faithless wife and an unnatural mother—and that the man she loved and lived with was not her husband, but a fraud and a disgrace from whom, as from her, all honest women and honourable men did well to shrink.

CHAPTER III.

‘YOU, ONCE MORE!’

ANTHONY was not the kind of man to take the world into his confidence. He neither sulked in his tents, like Achilles, nor showed his gaping wounds as his namesake showed those of Great Cæsar. He neither shirked his public duties for avoidance of contact with his fellow-men, nor madly rushed into dissipation for the better drowning of his sorrows. So far as outward conduct went, it would have seemed that no storm had destroyed his harvest, no earthquake shaken his roof-tree to the ground. Save that he was so lean in form and livid in face—so curt of speech and as bitter as curt—so evidently dangerous to all the limber-tongued and loose-

handed—he was the same as ever ; and none but himself was his confidant.

Time, as he sped on his endless way, placed a few social gravestones and opened out some new paths at Thorbergh. Among these last was the advent of the Smythe Smiths. The old family of the Massingberds, which had held the estate of Upperfold for as many generations as lie between to-day and the Third Edward, pinched between increased debts and decreased rents, found themselves at last obliged to sell ; and Mr. Smythe Smith was the purchaser. Of course the Blue Blood of the neighbourhood resented the change, and felt disposed to make the new-comer understand its resentment. But more modern, and perhaps more wise counsels prevailed, and the rich merchant was adopted in the room of the ruined gentleman whom he had dispossessed, and forgiven the fact that he had never a grandfather, nor an inherited coat-of-arms, nor knew Greek from Hebrew, nor Spanish from French, and that he could no more have construed ‘*Lucri bonus est odor, ex re quâlibet*’ than could the Unfortunate Noble-

man himself. He was rich, therefore he would be an acquisition ; he was long-headed and with the methodical habits of a man of business, and so far would help to keep things parochial and communal in order. And then Anthony Harford—undoubtedly the most considerable man in the district—knowing nothing of those hidden threads which bound their two fates together, threw the shield of his protection round the new-comers from the beginning ; and the neighbourhood naturally followed suit. So that the Smythe Smiths were soon included in the society of the place, and Anthony was the one who had done most for their adoption.

Naturally enough the Smythe Smiths were pained by the ingratitude, as it seemed to them, of Charlie Osborne’s silence. They had been his true and valuable backers when he most needed help, and had, moreover, given him affection in excess of patronage. Mr. Smythe Smith had really liked him—quite as much as a rich middle-aged man of business could be expected to like a handsome young artist without

a balance at his bank or a margin silently rolling itself up. And Mrs. Smythe Smith had been yet more warmly attached to him. If she had not suffered her fondness to overflow the banks of matronly discretion and trickle down into the bitter-sweet garden of unlawful love, it was not for want of inner temptation, but because she had resisted that temptation, and stuck manfully to propriety, quasi-maternity, and her husband. So that when Charlie disappeared out of sight, as if he had never been born or had gone over the rapids of Niagara—after that one visit in London on his return from Japan, fever, and his reported death, and that one brief letter from Kingshouse—the Smythe Smiths were naturally indignant, and thought no word too hard for the young man who erst had been their minor kind of modernized Apollo or their Raffaele in patent leather. If he had been what he ought to have been, and done as he ought to have done, they would have given him this other grand commission of Upperfold; but as things were they went to other men who charged them as much again as Charlie had

done—were never domesticated to the tame-cat condition to which he had attained—and did not put in such good work nor give themselves so much trouble as the young fellow who had wrought for love, fame, money, and artistic pleasure all round. And up to this time Anthony had never heard them mention the name of their disappointing young friend and decorative artist, and knew nothing of those former relations.

Lady Elizabeth, with whom the Smythe Smiths had always kept up a friendly correspondence, and who not infrequently had her to stay with them in London, knew no more than themselves what had befallen the former Eudemon of Kingshouse. That he had been and now was not, comprised the sum of her acquaintance with things Osbornean. She did not even know that he had gone to Thorbergh—that fact which all Kingshouse had seized and digested to found a thousand theories on its frail basis. But then Lady Elizabeth was always the last to hear news of the kind which is good for hypothesis rather than an addition

to knowledge. She was not a gossip in her own person, and those who were gossips kept their wallets unopened when they were with her. Of the existence of Mrs. Latimer and Mary Crosby she was also ignorant; so that she had no news to bring when she came to Upperfold on an early visit after the installation—Mrs. Smythe Smith not being averse from showing to their new society at their new place a live earl's fair-faced daughter as one of her friendly intimates.

There had been more changes than one of late. That we know. Among them was a certain change in Lady Elizabeth. Something had gone from her and something had been added to her. Her saintly quietude had gone, and in its place had come a certain active vitality, as of one whose softness has been tempered by fire and whose sympathy has become consciousness. It was the picture on the wax bitten into the plate by acid. She looked as if she had learned some lessons in a harder school than of yore—as if she had been through the fire on her own account. She was older; less

beautiful in one way if more so in another ; as if more knit together, and, in a sense, more passionate, more vitalized. She had fought with her wild beasts at Ephesus, and had conquered, not without loss and scars ; but her combat had been of more service than she knew. It had left her less the angel than the woman ; and her own personal experience of suffering made the whole difference between the sympathy that is born of pure pity and that which comes from knowledge.

She was standing on the one low broad step which was the entrance to Upperfold, waiting for her host. The groom was holding the riding-horses for herself and Mr. Smythe Smith. Mrs. Smythe Smith was not a horsewoman, and she was, moreover, occupied to-day with directing the hanging of certain pictures which had just come from London for the small drawing-room. It was one of those days in March which have been borrowed from May—a day, not according to the old Northern doggerel of the borrowed days of March, but a true harbinger, a real messenger of spring, accredited and bear-

ing the insignia. The warm south wind blew soft and sweet, as if it brought the scent of violets and the promise of roses. It stirred the leafless branches and quickened the sluggish sap slowly rising beneath the bark. It woke up something beneath the soil which sent a thrill through the sleeping roots of the hidden plants and flung a richer tint over the pointed blades of the growing grass. It was like May in good sooth—May, with its hopes and joys, its promises and expectations; and Lady Elizabeth, like all other living creatures, felt the sweet influences of the hour, and opened her white soul to the rosier rays of life, as a flower unfolds its petals to the sun.

She made a pretty picture as she stood there on the step, framed by the bold columns of the portico. Her riding-habit, free of all millinery excrescences, clung about her graceful figure as if some Greek sculptor had arranged the lines; and her hat cast over her brow that kind of shadow which so much enhances the beauty of the eyes. She was not thinking so much as feeling—and feeling as she had done for one

brief period in the days gone by. A new influx of youth and possible joy seemed to have invaded her brain and blood with that suggested scent of violets and promise of roses. The grey ashes of her life seemed to be fanned again into flame. She felt happy, she did not know why ; and for no reason that she could have given, had she been asked, her sweet, sad mouth relaxed into a smile, and the light in her grave eyes shone like the light of love and the flash of happy laughter. And as she stood there, more like the Delight of Anthony’s first days at Kingshouse than she had been since the hour when he had all but seen her weakness and divined her secret, Anthony himself came riding through the lodge-gates and up to the house, like the embodied spirit of the past—the human form of her sensations.

Before she had realized things as they were, and while she was still in that current of the past, where she had been swept backward by the day, Anthony had flung himself from his horse and had her hands in his—both her hands in both of his—as in the old days when he half

thought he loved her and half proposed to himself to ask her to be his wife.

For the moment Lady Elizabeth forgot all that lay between now and then—between the day when Anthony Harford was free to love whom he would, and when to love him was neither shame nor sin—and this present moment, when the pale spectre of Estelle stood as the sacred barrier between him and all other women on earth ; when love for him was crime and his love in return dishonour. She forgot all that she had suffered, all that she had subdued. This sudden re-appearance of the only man she had ever loved brought back to her both the strength and the weakness of her love. It was not Estelle's husband who held her hands in his and into whose eyes she looked. It was the Love she had loved—the dream which she had once taken for truth.

‘Ah!’ she said somewhat below her breath, and not knowing too well what it was she said at all ; ‘you, once more!’

‘Yes ; I once more,’ he returned a little grimly.

He was glad to see her, this dear Delight, who had been his as all others ; but her personality was so inextricably interwoven with the memory of the greatest glory and the deepest shame—the purest joy and the blackest sorrow of his life—that he remembered what she forgot. Where with her, Estelle was swept into oblivion, with him she stood at her right hand, and through the grey eyes of this fair Delight seemed to look the dark orbs of his lost love. Then suddenly he let go her hands, and almost mechanically felt for that revolver in his pocket, which he touched as a Catholic might touch his sacred relic.

At this moment Mr. Smythe Smith came through the hall, and all significance in the meeting was at once destroyed.

For Lady Elizabeth the south wind ceased to blow, and the silvery backwater of the past became the grey and stagnant present. Anthony Harford was no longer the Love she had loved but the husband of a missing wife—one not known to be dead nor known to be erring—but still the sacred barrier between him and all

other women. He might come with them, as he did, and so far repeat the circumstances of that enchanted ride at Kingshouse when he joined her and her father—but how different it all was! She wished now that she had not accepted the Smythe Smiths' invitation to Upperfold. She had believed herself stronger than she was. She had thought she could meet him again without pain or regret—and she had failed to herself and to her highest sense of right. All this she thought in those intervals of silence which are like sobs; while, as they rode along the lanes, Anthony plucked from her presence only the nightshade-like memory of Estelle, and felt as if her advent had brought him so much the nearer to his revenge.

CHAPTER IV.

LIKE OLD TIMES.

AFTER that first flush and failing, when the suddenness of surprise tore aside the veil, Lady Elizabeth ‘held on to herself,’ according to the quaint Puritanical phrase. Her mind underwent no more lapses of memory, nor did her feelings flow back into old channels. Anthony Harford was married. Failing proof positive of poor Estelle’s death, he was no honest woman’s love; and friendship was all that could be between one who respected herself and him. But there might be friendship. No law of God nor man forbade that! And, indeed, there was a friendship—pure, sincere, unabashed, undismayed. It was the sole flower that grew up

in the sandy desert of their lives, and they tended it with as much loving care as self-reverence.

They saw a great deal of Anthony at Upperfold—undoubtedly more than they saw of anyone else in the neighbourhood, or than anyone else in the neighbourhood saw of him. When he had no magisterial duties on hand—when the business of the estate did not demand his personal direction—when he was more than usually tired of himself and angry with fate—when all things in the past had left a yet bitterer taste in his mouth, and the brightest fact of the present was only Dead-Sea fruit—then he mounted his horse and rode off to Upperfold—ostensibly to visit the Smythe Smiths; in reality to talk to Lady Elizabeth. Her voice and manner soothed him as the harp of the Sweet Singer of Israel soothed the tormented spirit of the king. Her mere presence was enough. They never came near to the central thought of both alike; but each felt that the other was in sympathy, and Anthony knew that he might, when he would, open his heart

and pour out its griefs. He would be understood.

As yet he had said never a word of direct allusion to Estelle. That revolver in his pocket was more in his line. Once and once only he brushed by the skirts of his lost Eurydice—she whom the dread gods had taken, or who had sunk herself to the lowest depths of Hades.

‘You must come to Thrift,’ he said to Lady Elizabeth. ‘I want you to see my boy. I am sure you will see the likeness. It is so strong—there are days when I cannot look at him.’

‘I should like to see him very much indeed,’ said Lady Elizabeth quite simply. ‘You know how much I loved her.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Anthony; and the talk fell there.

He could not speak of Estelle even to her—at least, not yet. It would come; but not just yet; and she knew that it would come. She knew enough of human nature to be able to foresee so much. Friendship and reticence conquer the deepest reserve in the long run; and there are times with us all when sorrow rises so

high it overflows the heart and mounts perforce to the lips. Then the safe friend is trusted ; and the grief that is shared by sympathy is lightened by just so much.

Things of public interest had not been wanting of late as topics for conversation. For instance, there was that marriage of Anthony's childish plaything to the military-looking parson who had formerly been curate at Kingshouse ; and the escape they had had in the late earthquakes on the Riviera—so soon after their marriage, too ; such an uncomfortable experience ! but how well they had behaved ! Anthony had no idea the pretty little cuss had so much good sense ; and he would not have given her husband credit for his share, evidenced by his conduct. For public mention had been made in the papers of the coolness and presence of mind of the English clergyman, Mr. Medlicott, and of his wife, and of the tranquillizing effect they had had on the more nervous and less composed. A list too had been given of the English visitors ; and thus they knew twice over that the Kingshouse bride and bridegroom were safe and had

sustained no damage. They recognized in the list a name here and there of some one known in private or public; but neither saw more in ‘Mr. and Mrs. Charles’ than the patronymic of unknown and unimportant people. So passed some days—days indeed, lengthening into weeks—for all gossip took a long time to reach the Dower House, and a still longer time to transmit; and then Lady Elizabeth received a letter from her mother which froze the blood about her heart and flung her into the depths of moral perplexity.

Anne had, naturally enough, written to her mother the full account of what had happened—not only the story as the press gave it, but that other even graver fact of how she had met that infamous couple—those sad and fleeting forms of the modern Francesca and Paolo, for whom she had not had the great Florentine’s sweet pity. She told, instead, how she had confronted these sinful outcasts, denounced them as impure and branded them with their shame in the face of the world; how she had refused to remain under the same roof with one whose

unhallowed wedding-ring, that desecrated symbol—twice desecrated—soiled the purity of her own wedding wreath ; how she had seen them cast forth like sin-laden goats, bearing the burden of their guilt with them. She wrote a long and, for her, an impassioned letter. Life, which had once been all a vaporous dream, had so suddenly consolidated itself into realities that she was for the moment bewildered in her ethics and a little off her balance. Her cruelty she took to be virtue ; her unwomanliness was noble testimony ; her bride's vanity and pride of exclusiveness were the promptings of purity ; her former jealousy and resentment, quiescent then and now active, were the righteous retribution due to hypocrisy and the stripping off a mask which had been worn too long. Hence she glorified herself in what she had done ; and her mother took the same line. For nothing on earth is more cruel than the purity of a thin nature and narrow brain—nothing harder than the dealing of certain women who have kept on the right side of the line for those who have strayed to the left. And Anne and her mother were of

this kind. Lady Kingshouse was not. She and her daughter could afford to be pitiful. They were pure enough to be generous; and when she wrote the lady spoke gently of poor Estelle, and while condemning the sin spared the sinner.

It was not long after this letter that Anthony and Lady Elizabeth found themselves alone in the gardens at Upperfold. Mr. Smythe Smith had gone for the day to the nearest town. Mrs. Smythe Smith had a headache and was invisible. Lady Elizabeth had refused the offer of a solitary drive with the coachman in the dog-cart, or of a solitary ride with the groom through the lanes. She would content herself with the garden, she said, being of that sweet, unselfish kind who are so soon content! While walking there in the higher shrubbery, Anthony rode through the gate and caught sight of her in her leafless bower, where, however, snowdrops and early celandine were springing at her feet, and hawthorn twigs were showing red and green. He gave his horse to the groom, when he learnt that Mrs. Smythe Smith was not visible, and strode off to join his friend, who came down the path to meet

him. She was more sorrowful and perplexed than he knew of. With that letter in her pocket, and his uncertainty of knowledge, it was difficult to know what to do—what was the right thing to do:—to tell the truth and betray Estelle's sad secret, or to keep silent and see Anthony's terrible wound still bleed unstaunched. He was too miserable himself to-day to catch the trouble on her face. Old love had burnt anew, old sorrows had wept afresh. The coming spring had touched him as it touched all other living things—and, with the nesting birds and budding foliage, came thoughts of Estelle.

They sat down on a sheltered seat set under the hill and open to the south. For a moment there was deep silence between them; then suddenly Anthony spoke—looking not at Lady Elizabeth, but far out into the distance.

‘If I only knew the truth!’ he said. ‘If I did but know! Living or dead—false or only unhappy—which is it?’

‘What would you do if you did know?’ asked Lady Elizabeth, she too looking into the dim distance.

He brought his eyes back from space and fixed them on hers. He bent forward as one crouching for a spring, and laid his hand on her arm, gripping it till he bruised the tender flesh as if his fingers had been of iron.

‘What would I do?’ he repeated, in a low voice. He took out his revolver. ‘This,’ he said. ‘If false, I would kill her; if only estranged I would woo her back to me again. But it would be this!’

Lady Elizabeth confronted him, her eyes looking as steadily into his as his into hers.

‘I cannot believe you,’ she said with grave rebuke. ‘You were not a willing murderer when I first knew you!’

‘Other times, other manners,’ he answered with a bitter laugh. ‘When I first knew you I was not a disgraced husband set up for the world to ridicule. I had not loved and been betrayed. I had not a wife who had left me and her child, and hidden herself so closely away as to make me unable to find the faintest trace of her footsteps. Men are not

puppets, Lady Elizabeth; least of all, such a man as I.'

'But to commit murder for revenge is being worse than a puppet,' she returned steadily. 'It is being the mere creature of your own passions, guided and governed by them and not by yourself.'

'Not in the least,' he said in the same bitter manner. 'I assure you I should take her life, if I found she had been false to me, as deliberately as I would kill a snake or any other living thing whose nature is to work woe to men. She should not have the chance to break another honest man's heart nor wreck another honourable home!'

'You seem to forget there is such a virtue as forgiveness,' she said.

'Forgiveness is for fools,' he returned. 'Strong men never forgive.'

'On the contrary,' she answered quickly; 'it is the strong only who can forgive—who dare to be magnanimous. It is the weak who must have revenge when they are injured, because they are too weak and too vain to forgive.'

‘You are explicit, at all events,’ said Anthony, his lip lifted and his dark eyes blazing.

‘Because I respect you more than you respect yourself,’ was her reply. ‘Because what seems to you quite a natural and lawful thing to do, now in the moment of your anger, seems to me a dishonour against your nobler self—high treason against the real man you are.’

‘Sugar to coat the pill!’ he said.

She laid her hand on his and looked at him with more love than she knew of shining in her clear eyes.

‘No, friendship and respect shown in the very fact of daring to say unpleasant truths; belief in the real man in spite of the false appearance born of anger and distress.’

She spoke from her heart, and her voice was as soft and musical as her feeling was pure and tender. But Anthony was in no mood to be witched or softened.

‘And I suppose you would have me to be one of your curd-blooded crew?’ he said with a sneer. ‘You would have me take her back from her paramour, when he had tired of her,

and reinstate her here at Thrift as its mistress and my wife? Then I would be "magnanimous," "noble," "manly," and all the rest of the litany which women intone for the benefit of an erring sister whom they choose to take under their protection. Thank you. That is not quite my style, Lady Elizabeth; I should not have thought it yours.'

'I do not wish you to take her back to Thrift if she has left you for anyone else,' answered Lady Elizabeth; 'but I should like you to forgive her all the same, whatever she has done, and not to harbour such dark and deadly thoughts as you do.'

For all answer he took out his revolver again, and looked at it, touching it caressingly.

'This "ultima ratio regum,"' he said, half below his breath; 'and of outraged husbands, too!'

'I am sorry,' said Lady Elizabeth rising. 'I feel as if I had lost a friend by something worse than death.'

'You have lost one by her own dishonour,' was his hasty reply.

‘And the other by his inhuman passion,’ she answered.

‘So be it,’ he said, also rising in hot anger. ‘If I have to keep Lady Elizabeth Inchbold’s friendship only by making a cur of myself, I must forfeit it. I am used to suffering, and prefer this with self-respect to ease and cowardice.’

He met her lofty rebuke as loftily. From his own standpoint he was right and she was wrong. For a woman, perhaps she might have something to say for herself; but for him, a man, she was decidedly wrong.

Lady Elizabeth was a saint, but she was also a woman. She held fast by her sense of good and she was faithful in her abhorrence of evil; but the person counted for something, and she was not one to quarrel with a friend so dear as Anthony Harford. Besides, if a coolness sprang up between them, who would Estelle then have as her advocate when the time came, as it must and would, sooner or later, for Anthony to know the truth? It was her duty to keep on good terms with him for the sake of that poor ill-fated girl.

‘Do not let us quarrel,’ she said, offering her hand, her grave eyes suspiciously bright. ‘We have been friends from the first—let us keep so to the end.’

For a moment the proud man in Anthony, dressed in the brief authority of the offended, supplicated, looked coldly at this dear Delight. It was such a sweet moment—this of her offered hand and prayer for forgiveness—he could not deny himself its enjoyment.

It was only for a moment—the very briefest ; then the better self prevailed, and he took the fair woman’s hand in both of his and carried it to his lips.

‘Yes, we must be always friends,’ he said in a moved voice. ‘My life would indeed be dreary without your friendship. Love and happiness left me with her—my good angel would go with you !’

‘Let me be your good angel,’ said Lady Elizabeth fervently. ‘Let me have some real influence over you.’

‘Where you may,’ he answered gravely.

‘But there are parts of a man’s nature—tracts of thought and feeling—where no one ought to have influence ; least of all a woman.’

‘I shall know when I come upon them,’ was her enigmatical reply ; and then they talked of something else, or rather they did not for a few minutes talk of anything at all. Peace was re-established between them—that was the main fact of the moment—and as each felt the conqueror there was no sense of humiliation on either side.

‘She will never touch that subject again,’ thought Anthony, as he walked by his dear Delight’s side and breathed a little deeper because he had reduced her to his will.

‘This time I have taken two steps forward and fallen back one. The next time I shall make three and fall back none,’ thought Lady Elizabeth, she too breathing much more freely because of the hope she had that she could win poor Estelle’s forgiveness when the day of her ordeal should come.

After this first and only brush that had ever

been between the two, Anthony and Lady Elizabeth were yet oftener together and still more and more to each other than before. The old days at Kingshouse seemed to have been translated into these new conditions of Thorbergh ; but had there been the smallest approach to flirting or levity on either side, Mrs. Smythe Smith would have taken the alarm, and there would probably have been a scene of remonstrance or a false excuse for departure. But there was nothing to agitate the most sensitive prudery. Anthony came very often to Upperfold, but he was apparently as content with themselves as with Lady Elizabeth. If he rode out with her, it was under the escort of Mr. Smythe Smith ; and when he talked to her he was within eyeshot if not always within earshot of the rest. His friendship, too, was somewhat of a feather in the Smythe Smith's social cap ; and it is only grocers and people of that stamp who object to free intercourse between men and women where there is no love-making now and none likely to be in the future. So that the almost daily companionship went on

without let or hindrance, and Lady Elizabeth was grateful to her hostess for her trust. Knowing what she did, and having that ulterior object ever before her eyes, she held by her friendship with Anthony as the last hope of salvation poor Estelle was likely to have.

It was a heavy burden, however, to know what she did, and keep it back from the one most interested. If she could but bring him to a milder frame of mind she would tell him. He ought to divorce his poor erring wife to set her free to marry Charlie. If only she would influence him to this better and more magnanimous course! Meanwhile, she made herself almost necessary to his existence; and the power was waxing secretly and unknown to himself, as the roots of the flowers swelled beneath the sod and the sap in the trees rose even higher. And as a further clamp and rivet, Estelle's little year-old boy had 'taken to' Lady Elizabeth; and when he saw her would smile to her and hold out his pink hands, and make much of her when she took him in her arms.

'You see we all love you, Lady Elizabeth,'

said Anthony, one day, in his half-bitter, half-serious way. 'My boy, my dog, and even I, who, in your eyes, am not so good as either.'

CHAPTER V.

IN DIRE DISTRESS.

MEANWHILE, Estelle's cup of misery was full—so full that surely there was no room for more! In the earthquake she and Charlie had lost all they possessed, save the clothes in which they escaped and such loose silver as chanced to be in their pockets. The house had fallen in a heap of stones and dust, smashing and covering everything within the four walls; and their clothes and money had gone with the rest. If anything was found by the diggers it was kept, for nothing was restored—and the young people stood face to face with destitution of a far more formidable kind than that with which any other English visitor was threatened. Without re-

sources in themselves, they had none at home—no parents who would reinstate them—no friends who would club together for their benefit. Alone, and cut off from their past; disgraced where they were; penniless, denuded, dying—was there a lower deep? It seemed scarcely possible, save to Estelle when she thought of Charlie's death, or haply of her own before his.

As their only chance, they wrote to Mary, whom now they knew to have been the anonymous sender of those sporadic supplies—whose other secret also they knew. Estelle was thus doubly bound to this vulgar car of cheater and deception; for they knew her guilt and she knew theirs, and neither dared to betray the other. But Mary and her mother had the whip-hand, and knew it.

There is a certain class of persons—narrow in mind, affectionate in temperament, and penetrated with vanity—to whom generosity is easy but obligation impossible. When the question is of spontaneous assistance to a superior, there are no bounds to the good they will do, so long

as they can peacock themselves with the thought that they have ministered to the god and fed the king's son. But let that god lose his divinity and show himself shorn of his rays—let that king's son be cast down from his throne and thrust into the mud—let divinity and royalty be brought to the base level of the once proud protector, then claim continuance of that former protection—and the scene changes. It is no longer a matter for vanity, for self-gratulation, for self-peacocking. It is not protecting the superior ; it is simply helping the equal—maybe the inferior. The gifts which were tribute become now the doles which are charities, and by this change of character lose their charm. Duty is not so pleasant as freedom ; and the king's son in rags is not like the king's son in ermine and purple.

So it was with Mary. While she could feel that she helped one who had been her young master, who was well before the world, brilliant, courted, respected—while, too, she could salve over her tough conscience by saying to herself and her mother that her impersonation

of the dead Mrs. Latimer and the embezzlement of the money which should have been the Clanricardes, did more good as it was, she was liberal enough. When it came to a Charlie fallen and disgraced—to an Estelle guilty and a fugitive from the law—when the god had become the leper—then her heart changed, and her open hand gradually closed. No more honour was to be had out of her gifts; and it was foolishness to run the risk they were running and not make a good provision for the future. They were safe now from denunciation either by Charlie or Estelle—and really they could not undertake to support a runaway wife and her paramour.

So that when Estelle wrote to them, giving an account of the earthquake and their losses and asking for help, mother and daughter consulted together in adverse mood enough, and pronounced it a shame for grand folk like those to come upon poor people like them.

‘Do they think we are made of money?’ asked Mrs. Latimer shrewishly.

‘If they do they’ll have to find out their mistake,’ said Mary grimly.

So much of grace, however, had they as to remit Charlie Osborne a very small pittance, just to meet the most pressing wants of the moment—sending therewith a curt and disagreeable letter, full of covert insolence, saying that it was impossible for them to satisfy these constant and exorbitant demands—and that really Mrs. Harford must apply to her own people, who were better able to assist her than they. Poor folk like them had enough to do to keep their own heads above water.

Perhaps no trial had been greater to these two desolate creatures than was this letter, with its meagre remittance so reluctantly sent—its insolence so slightly veiled. Nothing but the absolute need of the moment bent their pride to the point of humiliation involved in the acceptance of this churlish dole. Penniless and denuded as they were, even these few pounds were better than nothing. But they were so few!—they went but a small way in the long

list of necessary restitutions!—and Estelle sat by Charlie's bedside, holding his burning hand in hers, and casting about in her own mind for a sheet-anchor in this stormy sea. It was a terrible moment. Even that when Anne had marked them with the brand of shame was less terrible than this. For this included the same confession of shame, and more beside.

Then Estelle made up her mind. It was a trial, but it was not a hazard. She knew the man, and felt sure that she could trust him. He was good and unselfish, and he had once loved her. Now that he was rich he would help her; even though helping her meant helping the man who had stood between them.

Her cheeks burnt as with fire; her hands were cold as marble; her heart throbbed with hope and fear and the shame of downcast pride all in one; but it had to be done. Caleb Stagg was her last chance, failing a direct appeal to Anthony—or one yet more direct to death and God! But the loving cling to life, however miserable they may be, if they can but live together. The dust of dead joys is better than

the peace of eternal sleep, if only they can hold each other's hands and forget their wretchedness in a kiss. When things are at their extreme it is time enough to voluntarily die. While they love they are never at this extreme; and Estelle, who knew that her beloved was now dying, would not have hastened that inevitable hour, no, not by one moment of coveted time ! Wherefore, she took her courage in both hands—wrote the story of her distress and denudation to Caleb Stagg, and spoke quite naturally of 'Mr. Osborne,' and of his state of health, and of her having joined him to look after him. She had, however, to add the slight change of name, and how they were known here at their hotel as 'Mr. and Mrs. Charles'—which gave a somewhat different complexion to the pure philanthropy of looking after her old friend and playmate, fallen into such a condition of health as demanded a competent nurse.

The first answer came by telegram. By return of post a substantial remittance was the second; and Estelle had not miscalculated. This sandy-haired, snub-nosed, ungainly omad-

haun was truly the bit of human gold she had believed him to be. The hump between the hunchback's shoulders was then the sheath wherein were folded the angel's wings; and Love, pure, unselfish Love, once more vindicated its right to be held as the God of the world and the great centre of all life that is worth living.

It was time that some help of this kind should come to these poor young people. The story of their unauthorized union had got abroad; and, though foreign hotel-keepers are lenient to this kind of thing where there are substantial assets at the back of it—when it comes to poverty and the want of a sacrament together, the combination is too strong, and outraged propriety has its word to say in shrill accents enough. The proprietor of the hotel, where these poor young creatures had taken shelter, knew all the story as it came up from the establishment below. As his hotel was nearly empty, because of fear of the earthquake, he was not disposed to ask too many searching questions, nor to look too narrowly into the marriage-lines of his new

guests. Also he was ready to wait a reasonable time for remittances from home. It was easy to understand that monsieur and madame had lost all their worldly goods as here possessed—but Dieu de Dieu ! they had funds at home—funds inexhaustible whatever the drain upon them—according to the rule of English milords. Hence, he was complacent, generous, trustful, unwearied in his professions of indifference to their temporary impecuniosity ; but now, when time, and more than time had elapsed for letters of advice to England and replies enclosing veritable El-Dorados and drafts and cheques to arrive, and no remittances had come to these doubtful young people—now he had become a little surly and more than a little suspicious. A very few days more of non-payment would have seen the dying man and the broken-hearted woman shivering and shelterless in the street. Compassion is a grand virtue, truly, but self-preservation is the more needful. Thanks, however, to that noblest of spiritual Princes disguised as material Beasts, all was now smooth and square ; and that cold, white bed of death might be made in peace.

The day was warm and bright, and the place was at its loveliest. Sea and sky were of the same deep blue, and both were as tranquil as twin children sleeping face to face. Scarce a ripple broke the glassy stillness of the one ; not the filmiest veil of vapour shrouded the brilliant glory of the other. The wind had no moan, the sky no tears, the sea no sobs ; but the flowers threw out their scents in aërial streams of perfume, and the birds sang with that ‘love of their own kind,’ that ‘ignorance of pain,’ which makes sorrowful men more sorrowful still by the very force of contrast. The subdued murmur of the sea came like that of bees in the limes ; and the hum of unseen insect life in the air was the shriller treble of the harmony. The sound of children’s voices, the distant barking of a dog, the sharp ring of horses’ hoofs, the grinding clatter of wheels, were the isolated sounds which accentuated the more dreamy music. But even these did not disturb the sense of joy, nor break the sense of peace with which the time was filled. It was a day which moved the world to love and laughter—wherein

the thrill of life was as strong as the sunshine and as passionate as the nightingale's song—as sweet as the scent of roses and orange-flowers—as divine as the kindly gods who rule the destinies of the fortunate and happy. It seemed impossible to be even ill at ease on such a day. And yet, what grief was in that chamber looking to the purple sea and across to the far distant land!—what dread in the present! what terror of the future!

The supreme moment had come at last, and poor, weak, handsome Charlie Osborne was at the end of all his failures and at the outset of his great journey. He had lived to his last moment and he had now only to resign himself to the inevitable parting from the woman whose life his love had ruined, and whom his death would leave desolate and destroyed. He half hoped, indeed, that she would not consent to live after him—that she would die either by force of nature or by the act of her own free will. He scarcely thought she could live, and he hidden away from her in the narrow grave. It seemed almost sacrilegious—almost criminal.

For all the wise tenderness and larger outlook which death brings to the dying, poor Charlie could not rise quite above that egotism which had been the ruling passion of his life. He did not think of her for herself so much as of her in reference to himself—not of the despair and misery she would suffer so much as of the cause—the loss of him, her lover and beloved. He had ever been his own centre; and even coming death had not dissolved the sweet flatteries of his self-esteem.

And yet he was not a bad fellow, taken any way. He was weak to his own desires, self-indulgent to his own fancies, and he had that fatal artistic temperament which cannot live or do good work under the strain of self-control. He must be cradled like a child in the arms of love, and fed like fabled fairies on the most gracious food of heaven. And what was good for him as an artist was good for him all through. Morality, as the world counts it, was nowhere compared to the pictures he could paint or the poems he could write. His egotism was so far tempered and excused; but it had wrought infinite mischief, take it how one would.

He was lying now quite still, breathing with extreme difficulty, his eyes for the most part shut; but every now and then he opened them on Estelle sitting motionless and silent by his bed-side. It was painful to him to speak. He had neither breath nor strength for articulation. He was quite conscious, though his mind and sensations were both a little dulled, so that he had ceased to regret even his departure with the poignancy of but a few days ago. Like that terrible grasp of a wild beast—like the benumbing fang of the spider—death for the most part paralyzes, so that suffering is not so acute; and love itself fades into unsubstantiality as sensation becomes weaker and thought more vaporous. Still, he was conscious of the moment and all it included: only the sharper edges were rounded off and the intensity was diluted.

Suddenly the life that was ebbing slowly away flowed back with transient strength, and the fire that was dying down blazed up anew with power and brightness.

‘You must write to Lady Elizabeth,’ he said to Estelle. ‘If you can—reconcile yourself with

your husband and get him to make you an allowance.'

It was like some one else speaking, and Estelle quivered with a superstitious kind of dread. It was so unlike Charlie to think of means and measures—to plan or to foresee! What strange revelations and stranger metamorphoses were bound up with this dread passage? Was the soul transformed before the body ceased to hold it?

'I will, if you wish it, Charlie,' she answered.

'Lady Elizabeth will be your friend,' he continued. 'Now that I am going, you want some one to befriend you.'

'I will obey you, darling,' she said softly.

A little smile broke over his wasted features.

'Always the same,' he said. 'The sweetest and the best on earth!'

She kissed his hand lying in hers, and then he closed his eyes and spoke no more. His breathing grew fainter and fainter—more interrupted, more laboured. There was a curious look of general collapse about the whole pose of the body, and the hand in hers was limp and

lifeless. Through the partially unclosed lids she saw that the eyes were turned, and over the face and brow broke out the clammy sweats of death. The open lips were as full of pain as the lips of the Medusa in her agony; and then came that hoarse rattle in the throat which told of the supreme moment.

Estelle rose to her feet and bent over the body of her dying lover. She neither rang nor called for the help or companionship of her kind. Alone, as she had lived with him, so would she be when he died; and no stranger should desecrate the solitude of their love.

With straining eyes and a heart that throbbed as if it would burst within her bosom, she stood there watching, till the last faint breath was drawn, and the life she had loved better than her own had sobbed itself away into nothingness and death. She knew when it came, and bent over with parted lips laid close to his to receive that last breath. She gathered it like a caress. It was like his very soul entering for ever into her body—his last touch, his last word!—Then darkness and a vague sense of falling came over

her. She heard nothing; she knew^d nothing. That knock at the door—that hurried tread of a man’s entering feet—that voice—all were lost to her—while a strong arm caught her as she fell, and a voice whispered softly :

‘Ah, my queenly lass, but thou’st come to a bad pass! God help thee, as I will!’

CHAPTER VI.

HER COMFORTER.

‘GOD tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.’ Sometimes; not always. The tempering to Estelle, for instance, was of the slightest quality so far as she herself was concerned—that essential She which felt and suffered. The watching world, judging of things by their material weight and texture only, would have said that the consoling breeze came direct from the south, and that she had cause for quite as much thankfulness as sorrow. Perhaps she had. Could she have felt as the world, she would have said that she had. Being, however, dead to all but her own suffering, she scarce recognized the benefits showered on her by Caleb Stagg, but took them as we

take the flowers of the gorse on the common when we are wandering, footsore, faint, and weary—our way lost—our direction unknown—the darkness of the night settling down. The flower which Linnæus wept for joy and gratitude to see is to us non-existent, or but the accompaniment of sharp-pointed thorns. Our troubles are too great for us to be able to perceive this minor charm—this smaller grace; and the law of psycho-dynamics holds good.

Yet Caleb was of use to Estelle—of as much use and of a like kind as the nails and joints which hold the coffin-planks together. He took all the trouble off her hands and let her indulge her grief unchecked. This was the best thing he could do for her; and she had a vague perception of its value. Such comfort as she could have she found in this quiet, unselfish worker, who stole like a shadow at her back, but who did with zeal and precision all that was necessary to be done. He was no more obtrusive than an intelligent machine; and Estelle, with the unconscious selfishness of grief, treated him with little more thought than if he had been a

machine. Do we feel grateful to the nails and joints of the coffin-planks, without which, however, our dear dead would be in sorry plight enough? They hold the coffin together, and keep the beloved safe from marauding beasts and birds of prey. But do we love them for that? Could she then love the man who arranged the details for Charlie's funeral, and so separated her from him for ever?

The fatal day had come and gone, and Estelle was now alone in the world, so far as her own consciousness of companionship went. She had almost forgotten her child; her husband had ceased to exist; her father and mother were as dead worlds; her whole past life at Kingshouse was a void. She had but one thought—one sentiment—her lost Love, and the bleak blackness of life without him. The spasm of something that was almost shame, which Anne's scorn had awakened, had gone into nothingness. Had she been asked, she would have planted her pride on her union with Charlie, and her shame would have gone to her marriage with Anthony. The one which

the world disdained and the law condemned was pure ; the other, which men called a sacrament, was impure. So she thought and felt, and Caleb was not the man to try to convince her of wrong reasoning.

But her state alarmed him. This blank and motionless despair was as a sickness he was unable to understand or cure. Had she wept or bewailed herself—had she been irritable in her grief and peevish in her sorrow—he would have known his way better ; but to be so still and silent and patient and lifeless, was something beyond his ken, and he was frightened in proportion to his ignorance. She had fallen into the same state as that which had come on her after she had married Anthony, save that she had not that point of horror and personal shrinking which had then been her active cross, and which she had put all her energy into concealing from the man whom she never felt to be aught but her purchaser and tyrant. To Caleb she was as indifferent as if he had been a trained dog walking on its hind legs,—but as gentle as she was indifferent. She let him order her times

and food, and suggest her dress without remonstrance or opposition. He took her out for drives, he sitting on the back seat like an attendant on royalty, and seldom daring to break the silence between them. When he did, she answered him with an effort—sometimes not at all, and sometimes wide of the mark. Sometimes she would stop the carriage and ask Caleb to get her such and such a flower that she saw by the wayside.

‘Charlie will like that,’ she would say; and when the flower was laid on his grave she seemed to feel a certain pleasure, and over her poor pale face would steal a faint sad smile, as if answering back one from him there in the dark grave beneath her feet.

Once she startled Caleb by saying, with unconscious parody of a more famous reduplication,

‘I think no woman’s lover but mine died twice. Once before I married him, and once after.’

‘It has been a sore trial for you,’ said Caleb, not knowing what else to say; and, by the way, not knowing what to call her.

This, in its degree, was a trial to him, accustomed as he was, like all people of his condition, to bring in the name of the person to whom he was speaking at every turn. It seemed to him so bald and uncivil not to give Estelle some kind of distinctive name. He could scarcely 'bring his tongue' to call her Mrs. Charles, and he would not wound her by calling her Mrs. Harford. When he did stumble over a designation at all, it was the former, for he would rather wound his own conscience than her feelings.

'Yes,' said Estelle, 'God has been very hard to me—very cruel. I wonder why?'

'Those whom He loveth He chasteneth,' said Caleb in a low voice. 'Because He loves you, Mrs. Charles.'

'And therefore killed my darling twice. I do not call that love,' she answered; and sank again into silence, from which Caleb did not dare to try to rouse her.

It was natural that the whole story should have excited a great interest in the English colony, both rooted and nomadic, which found

itself on the shores of this enchanting sea. Its mixture of pathos and criminality gave a pleasant savour to gossip; and pity, touched with condemnation, made a more interesting state of mind than one sentiment alone could have produced. To this was now added curiosity. Who was this man who had come to take possession of this sad and beautiful Impropriety? He was not her husband, evidently not a relation, and as evidently not a servant. He was too respectful for the one, too familiar for the other; also he was not up to her height socially; yet he had the command of money to a fabulous extent. The young English clergyman and his wife, who might have solved the mystery, had left the place; and conjecture exhausted itself in vain. No one came to the heart of the secret; and the poor omadhaun's true status and lines of relationship with this sorely-punished but unrepentant reprobate remained unknown. She, more beautiful and more desolate than Ariadne herself, and he the queerest-looking god that ever leapt from a car, steam-driven or panther-drawn—what chain could bind them together?

It was not love and it was not blood ; and the world is not quick to recognize the unselfish heroism of devotion.

If nothing was known here, all was patent at Kingshouse, and the bad black news flew about the place as fast as if carried on bats' wings in the twilight. It made the staple of conversation, and was the 'shame and the burning' of the hour. Not content with having left her own lawful husband for one man, this exceedingly improper person, this Mrs. Harford, had inveigled another. And such another ! The golden calf, the butt of his county, was her latest sacrifice ; and he, the fool that he was, did not see how she was making use of him and how she was treating him as a mere footstool or hearthrug ! It was really too shameful, look at it as one would ! She was past praying for, of course. She was lost for time and eternity, saving a miracle of grace to snatch her from those eternal fires she so richly deserved. But he—though he was a born idiot all but qualified for Earlswood—he was too good and simple-minded to be made the victim of an

artful intrigante who destroyed men's lives as cruelly as if they had been sacrifices offered up to Moloch.

Kingshouse waxed fierce in its virtue at this time. No Jew ever scraped with more zeal his floors and walls at Passover to make sure that no forbidden scrap of leaven lurked therein, than did the whole society of Estelle's old home repudiate her and her misdeeds. No one dared to sympathize with her sorrow for fear of seeming to condone her sin, and the general verdict was: 'She deserves all she has got;' and, 'She brought it on herself, the hussy!'

Mrs. Clanricarde had to bear more taunts and sneers and cold shoulders and tossed-up heads than her pride well knew how to endure; and that foolish George was crestfallen to a degree he had never been, even when he had most severely burned his fingers in the fire of the House. Somehow his clever wife made it out to be all his fault. From foundation to spire he had been the architect of this Satanic temple—and now see what a disgraceful thing he had made of it! Estelle was his child more than

hers, and he had always interfered in the careful training and education *she* would have given her. Had *she* been allowed to influence her, to direct her mind and form her morals when she was young, this would never have happened. But he would not allow it—and now, look at the result! She, the mother, washed her hands of the whole affair. She had no daughter, and Estelle was dead. That wretched creature, who had first lived with Charlie Osborne and was now being kept by Caleb Stagg, was not her child; and she forbade her husband to recognize her as his.

And when that foolish George wept and said that nature was stronger even than morality, his wife metaphorically bit off his head, and told him he was an atheist and she would hear no more of his blasphemy. She even went so far as to say: ‘That miserable girl or me, George. If you go to her you leave me for ever. Besides, where, if you please, is the money to go with? You have taken care that we shall never have a five-pound note to spare. How are you to go? Let that hideous young man bear the

burden. He has plenty of money. And when Mr. Harford divorces her he will marry her ; and so she will not have to starve ; which is as much as she can expect, and more than she deserves.'

To such a pass of hardness—like to the nether millstone—had large social ambition, personal pride, and perpetual poverty brought the mother's heart, which under more favourable conditions would have been soft and loving enough.

Of Mrs. Aspline, too, it must be sorrowfully said that, in this matter of Estelle's disgrace, she disclosed the one black spot in her otherwise rose-red heart. The Clanricardes had always treated her and Anne 'de haut en bas'; and perhaps it was but human nature that she should now exult a little more than was quite seemly in this sudden turn of the scale, which made hers heavy with the wealth of respectability and theirs light with the winged seeds of vice and disgrace. She was for the most part a kind old thing—a generous-natured old Cookey ; but this was the pull that wrenched

her good nature asunder, and let the little stream of gall trickle forth. The contrast to be made between snow-white Anne, under the hallowing influence of the matrimonial sacrament, and this besmirched Estelle, neither wife nor widow, was too strong to be resisted. She could not help herself. She must show Mrs. Clanricarde her disdain. And she did. And Mrs. Clanricarde knew that she did ; and suffered under it ; as we all do when fate has turned our old conditions topsy-turvy, and those who were on the bench below us are now on the daïs above.

Things at Mentone continued pretty much as they had been ever since poor Charlie's death. Estelle's intellect seemed benumbed, and showed no signs of reawakening. Her health was perfect, save for a certain fever in the blood that yet was not strong enough to devour her strength. It was only the brain which had become torpid, overtaken with sorrow, overweighted with despair. The only pleasures she had were those connected with Charlie, either by true remembrance or impossible phantasy ;

and the only subjects in which she showed any active interest were those of which he was the central point.

One day she and Caleb were sitting by the grave, where she used to pass some time of every day. She used to say she was 'going to Charlie,' when she made her friend understand she wanted to go to the cemetery; and imagination supplied something almost like reality. Charlie was always alive to her. He was out of sight but not out of hearing—in a narrow bed, lined with white and full of flowers, beneath the grass, but knowing what was going on above, and glad when she came to see him and to sit there at his feet.

Suddenly she looked up into Caleb's face. She seldom looked at him full like this—her faithful, dog-like friend and protector, whom she accepted as of the nature of things, like the morning's roll of bread or the daylight that comes between the dark and dark.

'I suppose the world thinks I did wrong? Anne Aspline said so,' she said, asking a question by the inflection of her voice.

‘I suppose so,’ said honest Caleb uncomfortably.

How he wished that he could have repudiated the idea and have shouted ‘No!’ to all the four quarters of heaven. But even though it was Estelle who had done it, for a married woman to leave her husband and live with another man was a long way beyond the limits of the morally permissible!

‘And did you?—do you?’ she asked again.

He writhed in spirit. Abstractedly, yes. The act had been profoundly immoral; but his was not the hand to hurt that already so cruelly wounded dove; and what mattered it what he thought? Who was he to lay down a law or presume to find fault with such as she?

‘I would never blame aught you did, Mrs. Charles. You know what you do, I reckon,’ he answered humbly.

‘But you think I did wrong all the same,’ she persisted, with the obstinacy of a sick mind.

‘It would have been an ill thing in anyone else,’ he returned.

‘I do not see the difference,’ she said. ‘I am

no better than another. He was; but I am not.'

'Why do you talk of it?' said Caleb. 'Please don't, Mrs. Charles. You did what you'd a mind to do, and so let it bide.'

'I did what I ought to have done,' said Estelle, with curious emphasis. 'They all deceived me—all made me commit that first sin. This was no sin; the other was. This was only putting things straight again.'

'That should comfort you to think of,' said Caleb, his eyes cast down.

'But now I have one wish—only one,' she continued. 'I want Mr. Harford to divorce me. Then I will be married to Charlie by the Church before I die.'

'Good Lord!' cried Caleb aghast. 'Mrs. Harford—Mrs. Charles—oh, my dear lady, whatever is it you are saying! Do think a bit. How can you be married to him, and him a-lying here?'

'Oh, yes, they will. I am sure I can,' was her reply. 'He is not dead, you know. Only his body is dead, but his soul is alive, and I can

be married to that—my soul to his before I die; and then we shall be all right when we meet in heaven.’

‘Lord’s sakes!’ said Caleb. ‘Did ever any-one hear the like!’

‘If you had as much faith as you ought to have you would understand me,’ answered Estelle; ‘and,’ again looking him full in the face, ‘you would sympathize with me and uphold me.’

‘I will uphold you, Mrs. Charles, in all and aught you wish to do,’ said Caleb with passionate solemnity. ‘But this is such an idea! I don’t well see how it can be. I doubt if ever a clergyman would be got to do it.’

‘We shall see,’ said Estelle. ‘And I intend to write to Mr. Harford and ask him. He will not refuse. He knows that I am not his wife now, and never was. I was only his married slave. My mother sold me and he bought me; and I owe him no more than any other slave owes her master. And not so much indeed!’

‘If you get him to divorce you it will be

another big talk,' said Caleb. 'Folks have talked enough at present. I'd be main sorry to give them more to set their teeth on!'

'Would you like me to go back to Mr. Harford?' she asked haughtily.

'Nay, that would I not,' he answered, his heart in his good, honest, homely face. 'What I would like best of all is that you should have some lady friend, like Lady Elizabeth, to come and bear you company, Mrs. Charles; and that you'd let me just go on as I am, looking after you and seeing that you want for nought. But I want no more clatter and no more worry to you. And if I were you I'd leave Mr. Harford alone until we see how things turn of themselves.'

'It is not fair,' she answered. 'I owe it to my darling's memory to get rid of this hated name, which I suppose is legally mine. Do you know, Mr. Stagg, I had almost forgotten it? For all these months that I have been with Charlie I never remembered that I was not legally his wife till that dreadful girl reminded

me. And then I forgot it again when he went from me. It is only quite lately that I have thought of it, and that I want so much to get rid of Mr. Harford, and to be his—my darling's—wholly and entirely.'

'It is a sweet thought and like yourself, Mrs. Charles,' said poor Caleb, in terrible perplexity how to meet this thought which was so insane, though so loving and womanly. 'But I think it wants considering. And if you'll be guided by me you'll wait until you are a little stronger before you put yourself about again. Will you let me write to Lady Elizabeth? That would be the wisest thing to do. If she could come here for a bit, that would be about the best job we could get through.'

'Yes,' said Estelle. 'Write to her. She was always good to me and *he* liked her. *He* would be pleased for me to have her here. Yes, do write. Let us go home,' she added feverishly. 'Let us go home at once and do you write at once.'

'I'll go for the trap,' said Caleb, bending to her mood as the shadow follows the substance.

‘We shall be in time for the post, I daresay, and she’ll have the letter the day after to-morrow.’

‘Dear, dear Lady Elizabeth!’ cried Estelle, to whom this new thought had given a new impulse. ‘Oh, if she were but here! She would help me! she would comfort me!’

Tears came into Caleb’s eyes, but he did not speak. His heart in its own unselfishness understood this waywardness, this ingratitude of the sick brain and sore soul. Still, it just for the moment stung him to hear this woman, for whom he would have died as patiently as he now served her, long for the advent of another friend who, she said, would be the Paraclete, the Comforter, he had tried to be and was not!

Estelle did not see his face. If she had, she would not have read it aright. She was possessed by this fresh idea of Lady Elizabeth’s coming to her; and for the moment Caleb Stagg was no more existing than this morning’s bread or yesterday’s daylight.

‘But she isn’t herself. My queenly lass, she isn’t herself!’ said Caleb in a low whisper as he

shambled to the gate of the cemetery for the carriage left standing there. 'And I should be wrong to take notice of a chance word like this, which means nought but itself. And it's but natural after all that she should want one of her own sex and kind. For what am I but a hoddadod, good only to fetch and carry!'

And with his round red eyes still full of tears he motioned the 'cocher' to drive up to the gate, and then went back for Estelle.

'Tell her to come—to come now at once,' said Estelle.

It was the burden of her speech all the way home.

'I shall be so glad to see her! She will manage it for me. I always thought Mr. Harford liked her in a way better than me. She would have made him a far better wife than I did. Perhaps she will marry him when he has made himself free as well as me. Only let her come! Oh, I wish she was here now!'

'A little patience, a few nights' sleep, Mrs. Charles, and she'll be over the doorstep,' said

Caleb encouragingly. 'Don't put yourself about. She'll come by the first train she can get.'

'And Charlie will be glad,' said Estelle.

As she said this she shivered and put her hands before her eyes. The little child she had left to its fate and had almost forgotten, suddenly seemed to rise in the air before her, as it had risen more than once before. 'But *she* will take it,' she said; 'and it never knew me, and never will regret me.' Then with a cry that was like something struck and wounded, she flung up her arms, and said: 'All! all! I have lost all! Home, name, my child, my beloved, and the world says my virtue. But I had him, and he loved me. What do I care for the rest—even for the child—in comparison to him!'

But she broke into tears, and sobbed with a passion Caleb had never seen in her before.

With an impulse he did not care to command, he leaned forward and took her hands.

'Mrs. Charles, I cannot have this,' he said, a little more firmly than he was wont to speak to

her, but with infinite tenderness and respect too. 'It's just foolishness, this looking back. You'll do yourself a mischief by carrying on like this. What's done is done, and there is no good in grieving over spilt milk. Your true friends stick by you, whatever the world says; and you have never yet been slighted by them as knew. Let the rest pass. What are they to you?'

'How good you are!' said Estelle after a pause. 'What should I do without you, Mr. Stagg?'

'But poorly, I doubt,' said Caleb simply, feeling amply rewarded for all his heartbreaks, all his sacrifices, by this one brief acknowledgment of his services.

By that evening's post the letter to Lady Elizabeth was written, and Caleb took it to the office himself to make sure of its safety. He himself was perplexed as to what the upshot of all this miserable coil would be. How would Mr. Harford behave when he came to know, as know he must, the whole story of his wife's infidelity? For some things Caleb was glad

that poor Charlie was dead. He had a kind of insight into the character of the man Estelle had to deal with; and perhaps it was as well that he had not one of his own sort to tackle and punish. He could scarce hurt this poor, broken-hearted lady. If he offered to lay a finger on her, Caleb felt that he had blood enough and muscle enough to strangle him rather than that he should do her harm by word or deed.

So he pondered, twisting his tongue in his mouth as he was wont to do when pre-occupied—when writing a letter, or settling his winged creatures in their cases, or doing anything else that took thought. And now his thoughts were hurrying across his brain, as numerous as so many gnats in the sunbeam; but the one most prominent of them all was: ‘If he offer to lay a finger on her I’ll have his life, though I come to a rope’s end for it!’

Truly was Estelle a fated woman—fated to work evil to men by her love and theirs—as Helen of Troy, or that Serpent of old Nile whose kisses lighted flame and fire, and slew

like sharp-edged swords—fated to work evil to herself, and to build her own funeral pyre out of the hearts she had broken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLOWING UP OF THE STORM.

A LUNCHEON-PARTY was on hand at Thrift. Really made up in Lady Elizabeth's honour, though apparently for the Snythe Smiths, it was one of the few entertainments which Anthony Harford had given since Estelle had ceased to exist for him—how many months ago now!—months that had lengthened into ages if sensation may be the measure of time.

Those of the neighbourhood who were invited were glad of this break in the monotony of their country-life, and especially glad to go to Anthony Harford's. The curious chatter which goes on about those whose lives have in any way touched on tragedy or melodrama,

still eddied round the Master of Thrift; and everyone was anxious to see how he would bear himself as the bereaved host, with that vacant chair at the head of the table. And more than one mother, with a bevy of nice good girls still tacked to her maternal skirts, sighed with profound pity as she spoke of poor dear Mr. Harford's desolate, and worse than desolate state. If he did but know the truth it would be so much better for him! If Mrs. Harford had been killed, or had committed suicide in a fit of mania—she was always a little odd and abstracted, was she not?—why then, you see, he would be free to marry again. And really, that poor little boy of his would be so much better off with a lady for his step-mother instead of a mere uneducated hireling of a nurse. And if she had gone off with anyone else—but who could it be? No one here, for certain; perhaps some one else she had met abroad—then he could get a divorce, and thus also he would be free. In any case it would be so much better if he knew; and he was greatly to be pitied for his miserable state of uncertainty—

neither married nor single—not free, yet not bound.

So they talked, full of that sympathy which has one hand on self-interest if the other is on pity; and each maternal possessor of unaffianced palm-branches wished that the Master of Thrift would like one of her girls in a modest, honourable, decorous way—that tentative and prefatal way which means potentialities and the hereafter rather than actualities now. But as yet the lonely owner of the finest place in the district had distinguished one no more than the other; and all the pretty Mauds and Mabels and Adas and Gladys had no more charm in his eyes than a cage full of canaries, nestless and unmated.

As the Smythe Smiths were driving towards Thrift, they met the rural postman on his tricycle, coming down from the north side of his district to the south. Thrift was thus served before Upperfold. As letters are always like the unknown treasures of Pandora's box in the country, the Smythe Smiths stopped the carriage and took their bag from the postman

—Mr. Smythe Smith distributing the contents. To his wife were many of the most profound unimportance, though among them was one which interested her greatly—one from her son, announcing his engagement with Lady Venetia Lackland. To Lady Elizabeth came two only—one from her mother; the other, in an unknown hand, redirected from abroad. Love conquering curiosity, she opened her mother's first and read there the further news of Estelle's sad life, the death of Charlie, and Caleb Stagg's departure. The other was from Caleb himself, telling her of Estelle's perilous condition, and asking her to come out to the Riviera at once.

Here then was a fresh turn of the rope and a new coil for all concerned. It was well for Lady Elizabeth that the Smythe Smiths were so much preoccupied with their own affairs they had no time to study her face. It would have betrayed too much if they had. Not that she had any longer the perplexity of choice which had disturbed her conscience in the first instance. Now that Charlie was dead and Estelle in need and

sorrow, Anthony must know the truth. He could not kill the one, as he would have done had he come up with him; surely he would not harm a hair of the other! In any case he must be told, and she, Lady Elizabeth, his friend throughout, must tell him. It was one of the most painful moments of her life, but it had to be gone through. It was a martyrdom, but it had to be endured.

That silent drive, broken only by the half-whispered congratulations of the parents, mutually elate, seemed all too short. The way had never been so soon traversed. In general, it was rather long, for all its beauty. To-day the hedges seemed to melt as they flew past—for surely the horses went at a hand gallop! Lady Elizabeth felt sick with conflicting emotions. Her sorrow for Estelle was pure and genuine; that for Anthony was as deep. She had to make herself believe that no harm would come of her telling him what she knew; and yet she remembered the expression of his face when he had said that he would kill the woman who had dishonoured him—if indeed she had wrought

this evil thing ! But all things come to an end—sorrow and wrong and a weary life among the rest. And perhaps Anthony's revenge would die out now that the cause of his jealousy was beneath the sod—with Estelle perhaps to follow. Poor sweet innocent Estelle ! Yes, innocent in spite of her crime !—innocent, for all that the world had the right to draw its skirts away from her contact, and that Anne Medlicott, in the first blush of her sanctioned bridal, had cause to denounce her as a sinner ! In that lady's gentle heart were only love and sorrow and sympathy and pity. Of the Puritan's stern repudiation she had none ; of the saint's courage of love for the condemned she had all.

As it chanced, the Upperfold party were the first to arrive at Thrift. Anthony was not in the drawing-room where they were taken ; and the room looked bleak and bare and comfortless to every one. Lady Elizabeth's heart beat fast, her lips were parched, her face was pale, and her whole being was possessed by some unspoken but painful excitement. The Smythe Smiths, on the contrary, were radiant with their cause for

exultation. Their son's fit betrothal was the one thing they had had to desire. All the rest had come to them; and now this wish, too, was fulfilled. Lady Venetia was everything that was most admirable as a woman and most advantageous as a daughter-in-law—for people with money and no forefathers. She was pretty, accomplished, amiable; and she was really quite sufficiently attached, as times go, to her wealthy parvenu to make the marriage less of a personal sacrifice than might have been. Love is out of fashion for the moment, and Juliet, like Hero, would be rococo and absurd. Lady Venetia had not a halfpenny of dower, and her lordly father's elbows were cooling in the air—as so many lordly elbows are cooling in the present day. The rich, warm, velvet-lined and gold-crowned nest of the Smythe Smiths was then a pleasant kind of brooding-place for a pretty girl without illusions—a girl who knew as well as her elders that beauty alone, unsupported by ingots, must give up something in its marriage. If it insists on equality of original rank it must be content with scanty rations. If it wants

wealth it must accept blood no bluer than London fog. For the most part it gives up ancestry for present possessions, and finds wealth of more solid advantage than heraldic bearings. So Lady Venetia argued, and her mother, like her father, assented; and young Lawrence Smythe Smith was in the lover's seventh heaven of delight; and his parents were in those blissful realms apportioned out in lots to gratified ambition.

They were sitting about the room, Mr. and Mrs. Smythe Smith full of happy babble undertoned—Lady Elizabeth silent, but speculating on what Estelle had cared for most in this stiff and desolate-looking chamber—when Anthony came in. Even more visibly than with Lady Elizabeth he bore the impress of something amiss on his face. His dark eyes were aflame with that fierce yet sombre light of a man's concealed passion. His lips were tightly shut and his teeth hard pressed together. He looked as a man might look who had been in hell—as in essential truth he had been—for that 'shadow of a soul on fire' encompassed him round about

and blotted out all the light of day. It was evidently with the greatest difficulty and only by the exercise of the strongest self-command that he performed his duties as host. He scarcely seemed to recognize the Smythe Smiths in their essential being. He spoke to them as living creatures, but they might have been the Parrotts, or the Langtons, or the Stringers, or Mr. Payne, or Mrs. Mitford, or anyone else, as well as themselves. It was so with all the others who came. He spoke to them, of course, and greeted them according to the prescribed formula, but he did not seem to differentiate, to distinguish one from the other. But he looked at Lady Elizabeth with wistfulness, as if he wished to speak to her ; and found in her face consolation—of a kind.

No private talk was, however, possible to people who knew their proper bearings ; and the two whose souls were so heavily laden had to bear their respective fardels for the present unshared. By swift degrees all the guests who had been invited assembled, and the ceremony of seating, with the function of eating, was gone

through in due order. But the party which had been designed for pleasure proved a torture to two and a boredom more or less pronounced to all save the Smythe Smiths. They were the only happy souls in the whole assembly. Carrying their own sunshine with them the atmosphere of others did not affect them ; and they had full employment, whispering to their respective neighbours on each side the happy news they had received to-day, which they put up as a graceful kind of excuse for any preoccupation or distraction of which they might be guilty. They were guilty of neither ; but it was a fine excuse and a good reason why. The grand great news which placed them on the social heights was not to be hidden under a bushel. It was a light which must be made to shine afar ; and to do them justice they held it as a flaming cresset which all within their horizon could not fail to see—nor, if even they would, were they suffered to ignore.

After the luncheon was over and the guests had risen, a number of them spread themselves over the garden and in among the houses.

Thrift had been famous for its orchids for as long as orchids had been fashionable in England; and Anthony's father had been a noted cultivator. The Smythe Smiths, ever anxious to take stock and measurement of others, so that haply they might go beyond in their own line, dispersed with the rest; and Anthony and Lady Elizabeth were left together. He had said to her in a low voice: 'I want to speak to you,' as she passed him at the table, and she had therefore held herself apart. For she, too, wanted to speak to him—to tell him what she knew.

Thus the thing was soon arranged, and what people might choose to say of this private meeting did not disturb either of them. When, therefore, they were all in the hall, and the majority had drifted out through the open door into the garden, he laid his broad hand on her arm and said, for anyone to hear who could or cared:

'Come with me into my study, Lady Elizabeth. I have something to show you—and say to you.'

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘So have I something to say and show you.’

‘About the same thing?’ he asked.

‘I imagine so,’ she answered.

Strong, athletic, brave as he was, Anthony quivered like an hysterical woman. His forehead and upper lip were wet with those drops which bespeak a man’s agony. Had it been his execution, he would have gone to that with more equanimity than he now approached the moment when he had to discuss Estelle’s condition with Lady Elizabeth.

‘My God! if you did but know what I have heard!’ he said fiercely.

‘Whatever it is you will bear it with patience and nobleness,’ returned Lady Elizabeth in her soft steadfast way, claiming magnanimity because believing in it.

He grasped her arm as if his fingers had been a vice, and, with the action of a gaoler, opened the study door and thrust her in. It was the second time he had failed in gentleness of bearing with this dear Delight; but the bonds and barriers of conventional politeness were broken

and destroyed, and only the urgent misery of the natural man remained.

‘ If this is true, I have but one course before me,’ he said, as he shut the door with a clang, and touched the revolver in his pocket.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRUGGLE.

‘READ this,’ said Anthony, thrusting a letter into Lady Elizabeth’s hand. ‘Can it be true? My God! it seems impossible of *her*—that woman of all! So pure and sweet as she was!’

He turned away to the window. The passion of wrath and grief that held him was almost more than he could bear. He felt as if he must die under it; and he did not wish Lady Elizabeth to see his agony.

The letter, which bore the Kingshouse postmark, was anonymous and written in a feigned hand; though Lady Elizabeth fancied she could detect certain well-known scratchy characters through the disguise. Whoever wrote it was

thoroughly up in the later history of the unfortunate fugitives, for the letter gave the whole story clearly and succinctly ‘up to date,’ as people say, without a mistake anywhere, save in colour. It told of the discovery by Mrs. Medlicott of Estelle and Charlie Osborne on the Riviera ; of their passing as man and wife under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Charles ; of the young bride’s virtuous indignation at the cheat which somehow seemed to lessen the legal sanction of her own estate, and the brave way in which she had stripped this false mask from those shameless faces ; of the man’s death ; of Caleb Stagg’s subsequent protection of the abandoned female left to poverty and shame. This last scene in the sad drama was laid out on the same lines as the first ; and the faithful omadhaun’s unselfish care, with Estelle’s half-unconscious acceptance, was treated as an act of cynical profligacy on his part, and of nameless infamy on hers. This was the false note which gave its worst aspect to the whole affair and made the first crooked step so unpardonable. One lover was unspeakable abomination for a married woman—but

immediately after the death of that one to pass into the hands of another—to be cared for, supported, ‘protected’ by him—what shame of strange disgrace ever equalled this? And this was the life and deed of Estelle, she, as Anthony had said, of all women the most sweet and pure!

‘Can it be true?’ asked Anthony, coming back to the table by which Lady Elizabeth was standing, still holding the letter in her hand.

‘It is true, and false,’ she said in a low voice, but quite distinctly.

She knew that the moment had come when she must prove herself, painful as it might be. She would rather have broached the subject in her own way, and given it her own colour and form. It would have been easier and more propitious for Estelle if she had not had to begin by correcting misconception—acknowledging the core of truth lying beneath the envelope of a lie—with that difficult after-process of separating truth from falsehood, and convincing one who did not want to be convinced of the exact proportions of each.

‘Yes?’ said Anthony, as a spur, when she paused.

‘Estelle did live with Mr. Osborne, as the letter says,’ she continued ; ‘but Caleb Stagg is simply her friend—the stopgap between her and starvation. He is not her lover.’

‘Not her lover?—only a Platonic friend, full of zealous philanthropy and Christian charity?’ sneered Anthony.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Elizabeth.

‘You speak confidently, my dear lady,’ he returned with a bitter laugh ; ‘more confidently than I should dare to do. You are a bold moralist to set the limits of a woman’s degradation when she has once begun. I never found those limits yet, and I have seen something of life.’

‘I know Estelle, and I love her,’ she said, as gently and as firmly as she had spoken before.

‘And I neither know nor love her?’ he replied with the same sneer.

‘If you believe her capable of this infamy, neither,’ she said in answer.

Again he turned to the window and leaned his face on his clasped hands resting on the sash. Between jealous anger and yearning love his soul was as a battle-field trodden over by hostile forces, and ploughed and torn by each in turn. Lady Elizabeth made a step forward as if to go to him, then stood still, and simply watched him with her large dilated eyes, from which it took all her power of self-control to keep the tears. She was in as great distress as he, if with less fierceness of passion; but she could not withdraw from the struggle. She was Estelle's only friend and advocate, and if she deserted her cause who would defend it? She felt that it had been laid on her as her duty to soften Anthony's heart towards this poor sweet and sorrowful sinner; and though it pained her—he did not know how much—to anger and withstand him, yet she must;—it was her duty, her assigned task, her only honourable course.

‘Then you think a man's love is measured by his “lâcheté”?’ he said fiercely after a pause, coming back to the table and confronting her,

much as if she had been the cause and origin of all.

‘No, indeed not! indeed not!’ she answered; ‘but by his magnanimity—his ability to understand all the circumstances and to forgive those which offend himself—yes; that I do think is the measure of a noble man’s true love.’

‘Adultery—desertion of husband, home and child—silence for months, leaving the deserted to all the agonies of suspense and ignorance—selfishness added to profligacy—and now the second fatal plunge into a still lower depth of dishonour—all this to be accepted by a husband as a venial offence—a slight departure from the strict lines of duty—to be condoned and forgiven without much difficulty? And then Lady Elizabeth Inchbold would say a man had loved his wife as he should; and that self-respect in repudiation would have been harsh and brutal!’

Anthony spoke with that artificial kind of distinctness which is a stage beyond the sharpness of a cry or the incoherence of a shriek. Every word told, and every word was an intentional blow. It was like punishing Charlie

Osborne, Estelle and Caleb in one to strike out at their defender.

‘I do not say this, Mr. Harford. You are scarcely just to me,’ she answered.

‘Not just to allow that you make guilt interesting, if less than admirable? Do you want me to confess that it is also admirable, and that our prosaic old notions about fidelity and honour and all the rest of it are mere lumber?’ said Anthony. ‘I must be under your tutelage some time longer, Lady Elizabeth, before I can pass in your school!’

‘If you will discuss this matter with me without anger against me—or her—we may come to a better understanding,’ answered Lady Elizabeth, with her well-known patience and self-suppression. ‘If you will not—or cannot—there is no use of my staying here.’

‘Kleine Sorgen machen zärtlich, grosse machen hart und wild,’ say the Germans. And the saying was true now with Anthony. His whole nature seemed to have become both soured and warped, and for the moment no good impulse was possible—no good influence

could touch him. Had an angel from heaven been standing there in Lady Elizabeth's place, he would have been no more soothed—no more amenable to reason than now. Conscious that he could hurt her, he took pleasure in making her feel the weight of his hand—the fire of his wrath. It was 'passing it on;' and so far it was comforting to think that he could make another wince where he smarted. Doubtless it was an unrighteous impulse, but it was sadly human.

'I am quite calm, and willing to discuss any subject on any basis you may desire,' said Anthony by way of reply. His calmness, by the way, was shown in his fiery eyes and the sneer on his uplifted lip. 'What anger can I have against you? If your ideas of a man's honour differ from mine, that is my misfortune. I object to my wife's passing from me to another man, and from that man to yet another. It does not seem to me quite the right thing for a woman to do. You uphold it in your friend, and blame me that I resent it. We are not agreed, that is all. But why anger?'

For a moment Lady Elizabeth flushed and quivered with pride as much as indignation. To the humblest-minded, the most democratic lady, come these moments of pride when a man's touch is rough and a man's word is rude. Then she remembers the inheritance of her birth, and stands on her superiority. This indignation of pride, however, lasted only a short time with Lady Elizabeth. With an effort she controlled herself and again thought only of the work in hand.

‘You do not put it any the more fairly, Mr. Harford,’ she said more coldly than she had spoken before; ‘for, in the first place, she has not passed into other hands. I tell you again that Mr. Stagg is no more to her than her servant. He is, indeed, to all intents and purposes most emphatically her servant!’

‘Who will have to settle accounts with me,’ said Anthony.

‘If in any other way than by your rendering him respect and gratitude, your accounts will go wrong,’ said Lady Elizabeth.

‘And here again we differ,’ said Anthony in

the same manner as before. 'According to your code I have not only to forgive the first lover, but to be grateful to the second. Your sliding scale is peculiar, Lady Elizabeth. It scarcely suits a man who has learned the rough side of life in such a school as mine has been. We are not taught these subtleties.'

'Yes, you have to forgive the dead and be grateful to the living,' repeated Lady Elizabeth, ignoring the latter half of his speech. 'And you have to be merciful to the dying,' she added, tears coming into her eyes.

'When she is dead I will forgive her,' said Anthony.

'She may be dead now,' said Lady Elizabeth.

He turned on her fiercely.

'What do you know about her?' he asked.

'Everything,' she answered.

She had Caleb's letter in her hand, that awkward, stiffly-worded letter, with the pure soul shining through like the moon through fog and vapour.

'And for how long, pray, have you been the

confidante of my runaway wife ?' he asked with dangerous quietness.

'She has not confided in me at all, but I have known for some days now that she was alive ; that he was dead and she perhaps dying only to-day.'

Anthony strode across the space which had been between, and took her by the arm, harshly rather than rudely.

'You are my friend ?' he said in a hoarse voice.

'Yes,' she answered ; 'I am.'

'And you have known for some days that she was alive—you knowing what a hell my life has been to me since she left me—how I would have kissed the hands and feet of my worst enemy who had told me she was alive—and you kept it from me—you, Lady Elizabeth Inchbold ?'

'Yes, I did,' she answered.

Her perfect calmness and the steady look in her soft eyes seemed almost to paralyze Anthony. He unclosed his hand from her bruised arm.

‘My God! you women are fiends sent to torture us!’ he said wildly. ‘All alike! The best and the worst faithless and untrustworthy alike!’

‘Is it faithless and untrustworthy to keep back a thing like this when the one to whom it would else have been told is as wild and unreasonable as you?’ she asked. ‘With that revolver in your pocket, and all your hot anger; with Mr. Osborne dying, and she, poor girl, in her agony; could I tell you, to add to her misery the greatest pain of all—your sudden appearance, your violence, and who knows what else! Ask yourself, how could I? I am her friend as well as yours, and I would not have her hurt by any deed of mine!’

‘How do you know I would have hurt her?’ he asked fiercely. ‘Am I a brute or a man? Why should I not have been gentle with her?’

‘Because you are not always reasonable,’ she answered. ‘If I could have trusted you I

would have told you. As things were I dared not.'

'A wild beast!' he said savagely.

'Too much like one at times,' she returned, her voice and eyes more gentle than her words.

For the first time during this painful interview the expression on Anthony's passionate face changed. Some of the fierceness died out of it to make way for a more human look of blank amazement. It was so strange to him to have this soft and sympathetic woman stand there as his assessor. He had been so used to her sweetness, to the consciousness of her affection and her sympathy, like a satin cloak in which he wrapped himself luxuriously, that this sudden change to condemnation struck him as something strange and unnatural in her rather than as injurious to him. Anyway, it gave a new turn to his thoughts, and swept back some of that rolling flood of anger against others.

'You are not the Lady Elizabeth I knew at Kingshouse,' he said.

‘Nor are you the Mr. Harford I thought I knew,’ she retorted.

‘No! This is really interesting,’ he sneered. ‘Where is the change? In what am I different?’

‘In nobility of nature,’ she answered. ‘The man I thought I knew three or four years ago at Kingshouse was brave and unselfish, magnanimous, gentle to weakness, courteous to women, reasonable, high-minded. The Mr. Harford I find here at Thrift is unreasonable, unforgiving, able to see a thing from his own point of view only, unable to judge beyond the mere fact, revengeful and cruel. I am right to say that he has changed—at least, from my ideal.’

‘Oh! I never posed for an ideal!’ said Anthony contemptuously.

‘Perhaps not; but this does not say that you were not a better man then than you are now. You have been tried since then, and you have not stood the test.’

‘Which brings us round to our starting-point,’ he said. ‘You advocate the baseness of condonation; I the self-respect of a man of honour

who refuses to shake hands with sin or to lower himself by sympathy to such a depth of degradation as to that which your friends have sunk themselves.'

'No; you mean you refuse to forgive a woman who has sinned much and suffered as much as she has sinned; and who has paid the full penalty of her fault—the woman you say you love. Greater men than you, Mr. Harford, have forgiven even worse offences, and the Master forgave more than all. It is neither brave nor strong to stand out as you are doing for the sake of yourself against her—your honour, as you call it, against her suffering. I will not call it good, for I do not think it is.'

'I am sorry I cannot please Lady Elizabeth,' said Anthony, still contemptuously, but with less bitterness, less intensity of insolence and wrath.

'It is not whether you please me or not. It is whether you do right or wrong,' she answered very gently.

‘Frankly, what would you have me do?’ He spoke with the air of a man lowering his sword, but still on guard.

‘Forgive her!’ she answered. ‘Forgive her frankly, truly, heartily. Remember that she loved Charlie Osborne long before she knew you. Remember, too, that false announcement of his death, which you knew on your wedding-day to be false. If she has left you, think how you and her mother deceived her. Cannot you bring all this to bear for her pardon? Divorce her, if you will; but why? She is not herself—her mind is evidently unhinged;’ here her soft voice broke, and her eyes filled with tears. ‘Let her be in peace, Mr. Harford! Fate has already avenged you.’

‘And you knew she did not love me? And you did not tell me this, either! Oh, false! false! like all the rest!’ he said bitterly, passionately.

‘How could I?’ she answered. ‘You knew it in your heart yourself, but you would not acknowledge it. If all the world had told

you, you would have married her just the same.'

'God help me, I would, for I loved her!' he said, covering his face in his hands.

'And because you loved her forgive her,' she pleaded. 'Think of her sufferings rather than her sin. By all that you have felt, feel for her. Tell me that you will forgive her.'

Anthony did not speak. His strong frame was quivering and one heavy tear broke through the interlacing of his fingers.

Weeping with less restraint, and all her tears in her voice, Lady Elizabeth went up to him, and with a woman's true instinct laid her hands on his shoulders.

'I am going to her to-morrow,' she said, her broken voice having in it the accent of a caress, like a pearl on a quivering golden string. 'Let me carry you her forgiveness; let me tell her that you pardon and pity her! Tell me that you do, Mr. Harford—Anthony—the man I once thought so noble, and who was so noble!'

For a moment there was no reply. The silence in the room was broken only by a few

half-strangled sobs—groans rather than sobs—while Lady Elizabeth's slender hands rested on those massive heaving shoulders with a touch as tender as an angel's. She looked like the typical angel as she stood there, her fair face pale with emotion, her eyes full of pleading love and pity, her body slightly thrown forward, her whole attitude and bearing as instinct with dignity as with pathos, as pure as it was tender—she, the friend, pleading for the pardon of the wife with the man she herself loved. A strange revulsion of feeling took possession of Anthony. He suddenly forgot himself, and his thoughts went only to Estelle's sufferings. He pictured her ill—in want—dying: that woman he had loved so madly needing help, and he not there to give what he was so grandly able to give! Perhaps the gentle touch of those white hands on his shoulders—the soft breath that just swept over his hair as if from a feather fan—a subtle perception, not so strong as a thought, that the world held another woman beside Estelle—perhaps all this helped to soften him and to quench the fires of his wrath. Whatever it was, he was

overcome, and his mood changed suddenly. He uncovered his disordered face, thrust his right hand into his pocket, took out the revolver, and laid it on the table.

‘You have conquered,’ he said. ‘I forgive her. Shall I give this to you?’—again taking up the revolver, ‘or can you trust me?’

‘I will trust you,’ she answered, scarce able to speak. ‘You will not break your word.’

He took her hands from his shoulders and held them in one of his; the other he put round her waist and pressed her to him. How long it was since he had held a woman in his arms! How the touch of that supple slender form seemed to give him new life, to subdue him to the strong man’s tenderness, conquered in his strength and brought back to his better self! At the first he did not speak, nor did she try to free herself. Both were too moved to remember what significance that embrace might have—he with her hands held up to his breast, his arm round her waist, and she with her face turned away and her eyes fixed on the sky seen through the window. At last Anthony spoke.

‘You Delight!’ he said softly. ‘More angel than woman! what have you done to me? Have you come to redeem me, or to make me despicable in my own eyes?’

‘I have come to help her and to prevent a mistake,’ she replied, her voice faltering.

She made a movement to free herself, but he held her still pressed to him. The voices of the Smythe Smiths, dominating the others, came in from the garden. The guests were returning from the orchids and the vineries.

‘We must go back to them,’ said Lady Elizabeth, whose embarrassment was becoming painful. Woman-like, she was the first to remember appearances and to think of details.

‘Yes,’ said Anthony with sudden coldness, releasing her and turning away. ‘This world has to be considered. They must not remember that——’ He paused. He was going to add: ‘that I am married and you are not my wife,’ but stopped himself in time. There was a suggestiveness in it that would perhaps offend her; and, harsh and even brutal as he had been only so short a time ago, he would not now

wound her for the wealth of the world or for the whole glory of life.

‘Then good-bye,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘I shall leave Uplands to-morrow morning, and shall not see you again.’

‘We shall meet,’ he answered, opening the door for her to pass out; but he himself went back into the room, and, the restraint of her presence now taken away—he sat down by the table and sobbed like a woman or a child. And his guests, who found Lady Elizabeth sitting alone in the drawing-room, had to leave without formal adieus to their host, whom they amused themselves in vilifying for most part of the way to their respective homes. ‘Such a boor!’ the women said, or ‘Such a bear!’—but the men said more fiercely: ‘What a cad that fellow is!’

CHAPTER IX.

TOO PURE TO FEAR.

EVEN the Smythe Smiths followed suit, and fell foul of their neglectful host with more acrimony than was usual to them. In general they were good-natured enough, as folks are who have anything still to get from the world, and who prefer to coax rather than to compel. But now that their son was about to make a marriage which would ally them with the real aristocracy—albeit with its elbows cooling in the air—they were disposed to stand a little more firmly on their rights, and to resent the slackness of any rope that should be taut.

‘It was most discourteous—most unusual!’ said Mrs. Smythe Smith severely. ‘I wonder

where he went—what became of him. Where were you, dear Lady Elizabeth? I missed you when we went to see the orchids.’

‘I saw him for a short time after then,’ said Lady Elizabeth, angel as she was, fibbing a little by implication—by the ‘*suggestio falsi*’ as well as the ‘*suppressio veri*.’ ‘He went into the library when I left him, and I heard him lock the door.’

‘Good heavens! is the man mad!’ said Mrs. Smythe Smith irritably. ‘He is really very ill-bred. I assure you I feel quite insulted, it was so abominably rude.’

She was seriously annoyed. To be sure, she had no daughter for whom to find a likely husband; but she none the less desired the friendship, intimate and familiar, of Mr. Harford, and had rather counted on showing off to-day before the rest the good terms on which they, the new-comers at Uplands, stood with the old House of Thrift.

‘He was in great trouble,’ said Lady Elizabeth.

Thinking rapidly, she came to the conclusion

that it would be better to tell the Smythe Smiths so much of the story as was meet for them to know. She knew that it would come out in time; and as she was now their guest, and was leaving them so hurriedly to-morrow, it seemed only fair to them that she should make them in part her confidantes.

‘He has had news of his poor wife—so have I,’ she continued.

‘Good gracious me!’ cried Mrs. Smythe Smith, startled into the vernacular of her youth. ‘Where is she, my dear? What has he heard? Why has she kept him so long in doubt whether she was alive or dead? My! what an extraordinary thing! Wherever can she be? And what on earth has she done?’

‘One question at a time, my love,’ said Mr. Smythe Smith coming in with his masculine reticence. ‘Lady Elizabeth cannot take up all those threads at once.’

‘She is ill,’ said Lady Elizabeth.

‘But where?’ asked Mrs. Smythe Smith.

‘At Mentone,’ said Lady Elizabeth, with a reluctance she tried to conceal and did not.

‘Then she did run away with some one!’ cried the other. ‘And it was her old lover, that young Osborne, of whom I thought better things!’

Shrewd woman as she was, she could put her two and two together as accurately as most.

Lady Elizabeth was silent. Her love and pity for Estelle went as far as silence, but not so far as falsehood. Her morality was not of that robust kind which makes its own laws, framed on the fluctuating condition of things—that eclectic morality which is opportunist rather than fixed. It was more rigid than this, if less superstitiously exact than with many.

‘Is it not so, Lady Elizabeth? Did she not go off with Mr. Osborne?’ repeated the young artist’s former hostess and quasi-maternal friend.

‘What I know I must not repeat,’ said Lady Elizabeth very gently. ‘My friend’s secrets are not mine.’

Mrs. Smythe Smith flushed with the sensitive

tremor of a woman not quite sure of herself. She did not know if Lady Elizabeth meant this for a rebuke or only for a fence; but Mr. Smythe Smith, who, as a man, had a tougher skin, slightly touched her foot with his in warning not to let that flush translate itself in words; and she took the hint as it was intended.

‘But I am going to-morrow to Mentone to see her,’ added Lady Elizabeth. ‘She was always one of my dearest friends, and I cannot bear to think of her out there alone, with no one belonging to her near her.’

‘Is she alone?’ asked Mrs. Smythe Smith.

‘Yes—one friend only is with her.’

‘Mr. Osborne?’ Mrs. Smythe Smith’s curiosity was irrepressible.

‘No,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘He is dead.’

Husband and wife looked at each other. This admission was a little rent in the thick veil of mystery in which the whole affair was shrouded.

‘And she is following?’ asked Mrs. Smythe Smith.

‘She is ill,’ said Lady Elizabeth, making a fine distinction not lost on her hearers.

‘How very sad!’ said Mrs. Smythe Smith with genuine sympathy, not stopping to consider that fracture of the wedding-ring which was all too certain, and thinking only of the suffering human being.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Elizabeth, whose eyes were, as so often before to-day, filling up with tears.

‘And you are going, my dear?’ asked Mrs. Smythe Smith, a faint little accent of surprise, that might mean almost displeasure, in her voice.

‘To-morrow,’ was the answer.

‘How will your people like that? Will your mother and Lord Kingshouse approve of it?’

‘Surely,’ said the earl’s daughter emphatically; ‘they know how much I love poor Estelle. They will think me quite right in going to see her now, in her time of trouble.’

‘But if she went off with that young man?’ asked Mrs. Smythe Smith.

‘That does not make her sufferings less pain-

ful nor his death less pitiable,' said Lady Elizabeth.

'No, not for herself; but for you? Those who touch pitch, you know; and Lady Elizabeth is too pure to be defiled.'

'If I am good for anything at all, I need not fear defilement,' she answered quickly. 'And defilement from Estelle! Dear friend! you do not know her as I do. She is the purest of the pure—the sweetest and best of all the girls I have ever known.'

'And left her husband to go off with another man?' said Mrs. Smythe Smith, her eyebrows uplifted.

'Whatever she may have done she cannot be corrupted,' said Lady Elizabeth warmly. 'Mistaken, yes; but not corrupted.'

'It does not do to palter with sin or to give soft words to wickedness,' said Mrs. Smythe Smith gravely.

Between her desire not to offend Lady Elizabeth and that curiously strict propriety belonging to the socially insecure she was in a cleft

stick ; but on the whole she inclined to propriety as the more lasting condition and the more stable foundation.

‘If you knew her as well as I do you would think as I do,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘It would be impossible for Estelle Clanricarde to be evil in heart.’

‘Only in deed ?’ queried Mr. Smythe Smith, making a neat point.

‘I do not defend all she has done, but evil in heart she certainly is not,’ answered Lady Elizabeth. ‘I know her so well ! I have known her ever since we were quite children together, and she cannot have suddenly changed her nature.’

‘Still, I do not think I would go to her, in all the circumstances, if I were you, until you had your parents’ sanction,’ said Mr. Smythe Smith sensibly enough.

‘I know they would not object,’ she answered.

‘Then, my dear young lady, let me advise you—wait till you are confirmed in your assurance,’ said her host, in his heart enjoying the new

attitude he had suddenly assumed of half-censuring Mentor to the earl's daughter, his social superior.

His manner, insensibly coloured by his feeling, dropped a little of its usual deference and took on itself a certain dash of sarcasm which was visible enough to his wife, if not to Lady Elizabeth herself. But a man like Mr. Smythe Smith does not often get the chance of lecturing a girl like Lady Elizabeth. What wonder that he enjoyed it and made the most of it—one of a nation so snobbish in its respect for rank as we are !

‘Perhaps it would be best,’ she said sweetly.

‘Without question,’ was the rejoinder. ‘Do nothing rash and then you will have nothing to repent. Your actions, my dear Lady Elizabeth, while you are unmarried, belong to your family to control. Your credit and your name are theirs, not your own. Wait, and let my lord decide.’

‘I can telegraph to-night, but I am sure of their consent,’ she said.

‘In which case you can start to-morrow, as

you propose, with a clean waybill,' he answered with a strange little smile—an artificial kind of assurance, which seemed to say that in his own person he was more than doubtful of that reply, and disbelieved in its affirmative.

But Lady Elizabeth was right. My lord's curt answer was simple and direct. 'Do as you wish,' it said—dictated partly by real kindness towards this desolate, misguided young creature, this Estelle, whom they had known in the days of her innocence and loved in the heyday of her beauty—and partly by the innate pride of the British nobleman, holding himself and his too high for any kind of danger by contact with any kind of inferior. Had Estelle been one of themselves he might have hesitated; being George Clanricarde's child, his dear Delight might throw over her the mantle of her charity, and her snow-white purity would get never a stain in consequence.

So that little hitch was overcome, and Lady Elizabeth made ready to start to-morrow for the Riviera, where she was to take the comfort

of her presence to that poor faithful servant, half distraught with his self-imposed charge—the soothing of her speech to that guilty soul, beaten down to worse than death by woe, yet too full of her lifelong love to have the sense of repentance.

And now, on the journey, Lady Elizabeth had leisure to think. For the last twenty-four hours all had been excitement and turmoil, and a confusion of feelings in which desire to help Estelle had been the only clear and simple line. She knew that she loved, and, in spite of his late defection from the nobler way, that she also respected Anthony Harford. But she did not quite know how strong, how passionate was that love. Girls do not understand themselves as do women of experience, when the well-known fires are rekindled, and the familiar eyes of re-awakened love shine afresh, and that which has been is again, under other forms and different names. Still, she felt that she bore something in her heart she neither wished to look at too closely nor to let others see at all.

She was conscious of a sense of blessedness in feeling that she could serve him—influence him to good—be of living use to him in any way. She was conscious, too, of a strange sense of happiness of which she was half afraid, and of shame for which she blushed, when she remembered how he had held her in his arms and she had felt the beating of his heart against her own. She was not accustomed to be held in the arms of men, and yet it had somehow seemed natural to be in his. She said to herself that it was just the impulse of a brother, conquered by her prayer and yielding to the victor. She knew that she was nothing to him—not even his sister—while Estelle was still his all. Yet that silent caress had been more precious than she liked to own or dared to think. Her father's favourite name for her danced in her brain to the music of Anthony's voice, not his; and 'You Delight!' was hammered out with every beat of the piston, and swung through the air in every turn of the wheels. She did her best to get away from these thoughts, through which ran an unacknowledged thread of disappointment

in that Anthony had not come to the station, as she expected. But, clinging as they were, they did not make her central feeling—her duty to Estelle—the less potent or clear. Still, they distracted and disturbed her. She tried to banish them; to fix her thoughts on Estelle's sufferings, her despair, her loss, her sorrows; but these faded away into a vague kind of mournful cloud, while, 'You Delight!' rang out between the iron staves like sweetest music—that silent, strong embrace repeated itself in her memory—and the thread of disappointed hope, in that she had not seen Anthony at the station as she had hoped, waxed broader and thicker and deeper.

Then, wearied and overcome by all this emotion, she burst into tears as she buried her face in the pillow provided for the night-journey, and with a sudden conviction of unspoken sin prayed for pardon, grace, and light with the whole fervour of her throbbing heart. And then she slept.

When she awoke the sun was shining; Estelle was near; and Anthony was banished from

her thoughts. She had been through the Valley, and the fire had scorched and blistered her overnight. To-day she was in the clear light of heaven, and her pain had passed.

CHAPTER X.

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS.

HARD words break no bones. Neither do angry ones mend them when broken. Anthony Harford proved this when he was lying on the road with a snapped 'tibia'—happily the fracture was simple, not compound—because his fiery young horse, with the hot temper and highly-strung nerves, had first shied at a traction engine, then bolted, and finally smashed the trap into match-wood, and emptied its contents by the wayside—leaving groom, luggage and master in a mass of moving conglomerate, while he himself ran up a bank and snorted like a demon over the spill below.

Had it not been for this untoward accident

which Anthony's full-flavoured Americanisms in no wise helped, Lady Elizabeth would not have gone to Mentone alone. He had fully intended to go with her, partly for her own sake but in greater part for Estelle's. The fire of his wrath against his faithless wife had died down, and that conversation with her dear advocate had left only infinite compassion for the suffering woman. He had no love for her now—at least, so he assured himself. Still, it was exquisite pain to him to think that Estelle should be in need of aught that he could give her. That girl, whom he had so passionately loved—that fair-faced, bashful and reluctant maid, whom he had held in his arms and called his own, and who he had made himself believe was his own in heart and mind as well as person—her reluctance counting for shyness—that she, who bore his name and was the mother of his son, should take from another what it was his duty to supply—what torture! what degradation! He longed to be the hand to lift her above all forms of want; but in his own clear mind he wished that she would die. He saw

no good for her, should she live. He would not take her back; and for his son's sake he did not care to divorce her. He did not wish to put her shame on the record for ever, and so sear the mother of his child with an ineffaceable brand; and if she were ill, as Lady Elizabeth had said, he would not harm her, and he did not mean now to kill himself because of her.

But he would forgive her. He wanted to forgive her before she died—to know that she sank into the deep river of eternity with his blessing, his pardon, and the sense and glory of his past love about her. Then she would be at peace with herself, and he would have satisfied his conscience.

Had Charlie Osborne still lived he could not have come to this state of mind. As things were, with his rival dead, all the passions roused by the late bitter tragedy had faded into so many shadows, and the only concrete fact that remained was the physical distress and pecuniary need of this poor simulacrum of her former self. The essential Estelle had died when she

left Thrift and her child for the evil ways of unfaithfulness and dishonour.

Still, though only this simulacrum of the woman he had so ardently loved, Anthony would have gone to her had he been able. But when a man is lying on a heavily-metalled road, with one sturdy leg bent and broken under him, he is not very fit for a twenty-four hours' journey by land and sea, let the desire be never so strong, the need never so pressing. Patience, in the form of splints and plaster of Paris, has to be taken instead ; and full-flavoured Americanisms do not help matters one jot.

So this was the reason why Lady Elizabeth was disappointed when she arrived at the railway-station, and the construction she put on Anthony's words were not justified by his deeds. She understood it all when she reached Mentone, and a telegram gave her the bare outline of what had happened. A letter would follow, said the brief notice ; and with this Lady Elizabeth had to be content till the letter did arrive which gave all the details.

And indeed, in the new conditions in which

she found herself, the sharper outlines of the old were obscured, and the things of the present obliterated those of the past. She had neither time nor heart to think of Anthony when she was with Anthony's distressful wife. His broken leg was a painful incident, but it was not dangerous nor would it have ulterior consequences; while Estelle's clouded brain and warped senses—her dogged grief and strange dreams and desires—her ruined repute and the dread possibilities of the future—were all chapters of a book which might have more than one ending—but all endings alike must be equally sad. Besides, Lady Elizabeth had struggled against that sudden uprising of her inner self as she would have struggled with an armed man seeking to overthrow her. And as we can, when we will, be victorious in such contests, she was once more in her own possession and no longer the reed shaken in the breath of a passion that was as strange as it was dangerous.

The arrival of Lady Elizabeth at the first gave Estelle a spell of renewed mental vigour. She

recovered her intellectual tone as a slackened fire blazes up when it receives a fresh supply of fuel. It was almost like the shadow of her beloved thrown across the darkness of her days, to have Lady Elizabeth here—she who was so bound up with the earlier part of this grievous history and who in a manner reproduced the past and redeemed the present. And—oh for the ingratitude of the beloved who do not love!—it was a relief beyond words to have some one about her other than that faithful slave who did all that was necessary for her material well-being, but who supplied no element of personal happiness and no spiritual sustenance! She could bear with his queer awkward ways and irritating devotion more patiently now that Lady Elizabeth was there to share the burden of his personality; and she felt altogether freer than she had done—freer, that is, from the incubus of her dark depression, and more able to understand herself and her surroundings. For it was better to have the throes of a sharper pain, with intervals of relief, than to be always under the influence of a grief which

crushed her to the ground and shut up her soul in unchanging darkness. Thus it was that Estelle rallied for the first days and even weeks of Lady Elizabeth's arrival, and cheated her friends into the delusive hope of a possible permanent recovery.

It was a curious psychological fact that she seemed to have entirely forgotten her marriage with Anthony Harford and her motherhood of his child. Though she left off living on his grave, her whole talk was of Charlie. She spoke of him, however, more in relation to her girlish life—more as the young lover forbidden by the authorities—than as the dying husband of these later times. Lady Elizabeth did not know if this was a purely mental phenomenon or an act of reticence for the sake of the morality she had outraged. She never discovered which it was, for she was too tender to bring the poor sinner to book and force from her the confession of a sin she did not regret and the expression of a repentance she did not feel. She let her talk as she would, and did her best to keep her mind active and alert ; and she left the tortures of an

awakened conscience to a time when Estelle should be stronger in mental health and clearer in mental vision.

Meanwhile, Anthony Harford's broken bone was knitting together as vigorously as such a man's naturally would, with his certain advent when he should be able to move, supported on crutches and strengthened by splints.

One day the three were sitting on the seat outside the garden of the hotel, where they were staying, basking in the sun and looking at the gentian-coloured sea before them. Estelle was in one corner of the seat and Lady Elizabeth was next her. Screwed up as far away in the other corner as was possible, and sitting awkwardly, as beseemed his modesty, Caleb watched each breath of those parted lips—studied each expression of that flower-like face—lovely and flower-like yet, for all its comparative deadness—looking every now and then at Lady Elizabeth as a dog looks to its master, a deaf-mute to his instructor. It was one of Estelle's favourable days, when her brain was clearer than usual and the dulness of her senses

was broken up, as it were, by light and the free air. Her spirits were brighter; and life altogether had less oppression for her than was usual. She was talking to Lady Elizabeth more in her old way than she had done yet, and of other things than the one monotonously mournful theme. A faint smile gave the corners of her sweet lips their well-known dimples; and her eyes had a certain dewy softness, unlike the mournful strain, or hard and feverish brightness, which were the worse symptoms where so many were bad. She was almost the Estelle of her former happy and innocent days—had she ever ceased to be intrinsically innocent?—and Lady Elizabeth, whose mission was to heal, not to scarify—soothe, not sting—felt her own heart all the lighter for the temporary sunshine over her friend.

Suddenly voices, only too well known, struck on their ears, and the Medlicotts came into view. They had been as far as Florence, but had turned back on their steps and had taken Mentone on their way home. This was against the wish of the husband, but by the will of the wife; and

that will—quiet, persistent, unrelaxing, undeviating—was beginning to make its usual headway. One of those unaggressive women who are never in open opposition, Anne knew how to have her own way without a quarrel and without defeat. And as she was devoured by curiosity to learn all about those dreadful people, as she called Estelle and her faithful slave, she was determined to gratify it. It was the curiosity of ignorance, with the desire of outraged propriety to have its say on the evil litany chanted between love and sin. She had heard by now of Lady Elizabeth's last craze, as Mrs. Aspline termed it; and she felt she must see with her own eyes how far that madness of sympathy had committed the Lily of Kingshouse to complicity with crime. She felt so much stronger and bigger in her perfect spotlessness than them all, even than Lady Elizabeth! She, Anne Aspline, the somewhat snubbed daughter of a decidedly snubbed mother, now holding the ferule over the heads of those who had formerly rapped her knuckles! To be sure, Lady Elizabeth in her own person had never rapped her knuckles,

nor any other's, but she belonged to those who had ; and class solidarity is a fact like any other.

The persistency of Anne's mind in her eager contemplation of Estelle's fault was a strange fact in human nature. For all her strong condemnation, she could not forego the unwholesome fascination which this naughtiness had for her. It was the same fascination that a book of Zola's has for his readers. They condemn it, and call it shocking and horrible and monstrous and depraved, but all read to the end. No one shuts the book and puts it in the fire unfinished—that fascination being even more absorbing than the condemnation is strong. So with Anne. This fearful corruption, as it seemed to her, of a girl whom she had personally known, and who had been on a higher social platform than herself, was a page of living Zolaism which she must read to the last words, that bad taste in her mouth notwithstanding.

To herself, her desire to still pursue and denounce this evil-doer made her no more cruel than was the Jewish executioner when he flung the

first stone at the sinners against morality, and offered them up as sacrifices to the offended virtue of the race and the mutilated majesty of the law. All strife is hard, and its methods are self-justified. When the struggle is between vice and virtue—where virtue holds the whip and vice has to be driven into the wilderness, so that the tents of righteous Israel may be cleansed from the stain of this vileness—no severity is too great for the accomplishment of that cleansing. And Anne but followed the law of her kind when, coming up to the group sitting in the sun like wholesome creatures, and not slinking out of sight like the moral lepers two at least of them were, she felt like a young warrior who has unsheathed his sword and rushes forward to flesh it in the foe.

‘Oh, how can Lady Elizabeth do such a thing!’ she said, loud enough to be heard, as she forced her husband to halt within earshot of the trio. ‘I wanted so much to speak to her, but how can I when she is sitting familiarly with that infamous woman and that awful man!’

‘Hush, my dear! softly, Annette!’ said Mr. Medlicott in a lower voice.

He was not so keen in this testifying of virtue as was his young wife, and he was naturally more pitiful to Estelle. As a man who had been to college and been proctorized more than once when sowing those wild oats of his more liberally than discreetly, and who had afterwards knocked about London and made acquaintance with the music-halls and their habituées, he knew the devious paths better than a virtuous young woman who had never left her mother's side. And knowledge leads to tolerance on more matters than one.

‘Why should I hush?’ cried Anne shrilly. ‘Do you think it very pleasant for me to see Lady Elizabeth—a friend who has dined in our house and we in hers—lower herself to such infamous surroundings as a runaway wife and a common miner like that horrid Mr. Stagg?’

‘Lady Elizabeth is not a child, my dear; she knows her own affairs best, and what she wishes to do and how to conduct herself,’ was the reply. ‘Come on, Annette,’ he added, moving away, ‘I dislike this publicity so much. It is not ladylike, my dear. It is not Christian!’

‘It is right,’ said Anne, her mouth set close, and her upper lip pulled down, as was her wont when recalcitrant and determined. ‘This creature is a shameless sinner, and Lady Elizabeth ought not to be with her.’

All this was heard with cruel distinctness by the three on the seat. Such wind as there was, set that way, and brought the sounds sharply to the senses. Estelle’s face first paled as her ears took in Anne’s words, and their meaning became clear to her mind. Then it flamed with fever and excitement, and her large eyes glistened and shone with dangerous brilliancy. Caleb stirred in his place like a hound held in leash, looking now at Anne with indignation staring in his round, reddidded eyes, now at Estelle with half-terrified compassion, and again at Lady Elizabeth as if for direction.

‘That she ever could!’ he kept on saying to himself. ‘That she ever could—and this queenly lass not herself, as one might say!’

‘That fearful girl—she is like a ghoul!’ said Estelle with a shudder. ‘She helped to kill my

darling. He would have lived longer if she had not spoken as she did. And now she has come to kill me.'

'Do not mind her, Estelle,' said Lady Elizabeth soothingly. 'She never had much intellect, and what she has is all perverted by false views. Do not care for what she says.'

'No, I do not care what she says to me,' said Estelle feverishly, knocking up the dust with her parasol. 'But she killed my darling,' she added; 'and for that I can never forgive her.'

'You are a clergyman,' then came Anne's voice, speaking still more distinctly to her retreating husband. 'You ought to speak to them.'

'My dear, I am a man and a gentleman, as well as a priest,' said Mr. Medlicott with fine rebuke.

'But the priest comes first,' said Anne, 'and you ought to speak both to Lady Elizabeth and that infamous creature. She should not be allowed to remain here. It is too bad of these hotel-keepers—insulting proper people like this!'

“Who maketh His rain to fall on the just and the unjust,” said Mr. Medlicott in his parsonic voice.

‘We are not God,’ said Anne; ‘and Lady Elizabeth no more than anyone else.’

‘I must put a stop to this,’ said Lady Elizabeth; and with the words she rose from her place and went straight to where the Medlicotts stood, he temporizing and she testifying, while Estelle knocked up the dust with the end of her parasol, and Caleb stood so that she should not see the group which by now had moved away out of hearing. But something had come into Estelle’s face that had not been there before, and she had a certain look of recoil on herself that might turn to danger.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRECIOUS BALMS.

‘I HEARD you say you wanted to speak to me, Mrs. Medicott,’ said Lady Elizabeth with perfect composure. ‘You spoke so that we could hear all you said, as I presume you intended we should. And I heard this. What is it you want to say to me?’

Anne was taken aback. Between her new dignity as a married woman, making her superior to Lady Elizabeth in her state of unfledged maidenhood, and her natural veneration for the grand young lady of her old home—between this natural veneration and her moral reprobation of Lady Elizabeth’s consorting

with Estelle, she was for a moment in a chaotic condition, and did not quite know what to do. She wished to be at once respectful to the earl's daughter and severe to the associate of sinners—mindful of the claims of rank while upholding those of morality; and the combination was difficult. But as Lady Elizabeth was there before her, those clear grey eyes looking straight into her own, and the soft tones of her voice still vibrating in the air, a reply had to be made, deftly or awkwardly, as it might happen.

‘I am so sorry to see you with that dreadful person, Lady Elizabeth; so sorry to hear you say “we,”’ then said Anne, taking a header into the depths.

‘What person? Mrs. Harford or Mr. Stagg?’ asked the lady.

‘Both!’ said Anne.

‘Why?’

Lady Elizabeth asked this as tranquilly as if Estelle had never broken her marriage-vows, and Caleb Stagg, the miner's son, were the Home Secretary at the least.

‘Why? Oh, Lady Elizabeth, how can you

ask such a thing!’ cried Anne, roused out of fear by the strength of her anger. ‘You—you—that we all look up to at Kingshouse—you to be sitting there like an equal with a fallen woman and the common man who supports her. And then you say “why?” when a person like myself objects.’

‘That you are free from her special sin I know,’ said Elizabeth gently. ‘But are you so free from *all* sin, Mrs. Medicott, that you can afford to be so severe? There is not only one kind of evil in this world; there are many kinds. Which of us is free from them all?’

‘By George, no!’ muttered Mr. Medicott, forgetting his Orders and remembering his Varsity days.

‘Oh, Lady Elizabeth!’ cried Anne again, unutterably shocked, and not having heard her husband; ‘do you class running-away from her husband and child, and living under a false name with another man as his wife, a sin no worse than telling a little falsehood now and then, or being a little cross, or lazy, or ill-natured, or anything like that? It is dreadful!

Where shall we all come to if we make no more distinction than this?’

‘We should come to more charity than we have now,’ Lady Elizabeth answered.

‘Laxity, you mean,’ put in Anne warmly.

‘No, Christian charity,’ was the response. ‘That poor girl there is scarcely herself. Her grief has touched the fineness of her intellect, and she is scarcely responsible for what she says or does. Cannot you feel some kind of pity for a life so wasted, so wrecked, so unhappy?’

‘No,’ said Anne. ‘She deserves it all and more. We have no right to pity such wicked people as she and Mr. Osborne, for all that he is dead. They deserve to die. They ought to die, or go mad, or something, and not live to set a bad example to others and to be pitied and made much of, as if they had done nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘Is this the Christianity you teach, Mr. Medlicott?’ asked Lady Elizabeth, turning to Anne’s uncomfortable husband, standing there in the

trimmer's distress, wishing to restrain his Annette's rude testifying, yet not wishing to fail the severe dignity of his cloth.

'It is always difficult to reconcile Christian charity with Christian purity,' he said smoothly. Who felt that difficulty more acutely than he?

'Our Lord pardoned sinners,' was Lady Elizabeth's commentary.

'Because He was Our Lord and had the right and the power. But we frail, fallible mortals are different. We must hold the standard of purity high, and keep the light of the lamp undimmed. We must not be too pitiful to the sinners lest we should forget to hate the sin. To condemn cards, and pardon the sharper, you know is absurd, Lady Elizabeth. But this is the danger of too great leniency—too great compassion for the evil-doer.'

This he said as his confession of faith for Anne's sake, not deeming it wise in her presence to be less exacting for purity than his young wife—having always before him the dread of

weakening those bonds of restraint which men loosen for their pleasure out of the home and draw tight for their security within it.

‘Yet the very life and spirit of the gospels is charity ; and the Apostles taught the same sweet truth,’ said Lady Elizabeth.

‘Not to women who run away from their husbands with other men, and leave their children to be brought up anyhow by strangers,’ persisted Anne, coming back to her point as a cat comes back to the mouse-hole. ‘If Mrs. Harford had wanted to leave her husband—and that would have been wicked enough when once she had married him—she need not have gone off with Mr. Osborne. If she did not love the man she married she could at least have kept herself correct,’ she added with unanswerable justice.

‘I do not defend Estelle’s action, but we must remember the whole circumstance before we can judge it rightly,’ Lady Elizabeth answered. ‘She had loved Charlie Osborne all her life. She was induced to marry Mr. Harford only after she had been deceived by a false

report of his death; and when she saw her old lover again she went away with him on the spur of the moment—not after thought and deliberation. It was not like loving a stranger after marriage. It was more like going back to her own.’

‘Then,’ said Anne hotly, ‘you hold that a girl is justified in going back to her own, as you call it—that is, in leaving her husband for her first love if he happens to cross her path. Is that what you mean to say, Lady Elizabeth? I can scarcely believe it of you—you, of all people in the world!’

‘I did not quite say that,’ was the quiet reply. ‘You have overstated me, Mrs. Medlicott. I only excuse poor Estelle somewhat, not only because of her long and deep-rooted attachment, but because she had been, as it were, betrayed into her marriage with a man she did not love. And it seemed more natural to her to give her life to Mr. Osborne, the man she did love.’

‘All this is dreadful,’ cried Anne aghast. ‘And her marriage-vows to go for nothing!’

Whatever she felt she should have borne it. Had she not vowed that she would ?'

'We are frail creatures under temptation,' said Lady Elizabeth.

'And we should be frailer if such principles as these were accepted !' cried Anne. 'That I should have lived to hear such awful sentiments from Lady Elizabeth Inchbold ! It is fearful ! And the earthquake here so lately ! I wonder you have the courage, Lady Elizabeth. I wonder you are not afraid.'

She was sincerely stirred. Narrow and hard she might be, and with the cruelty of former jealousy added to the cruelty of condemnation, but she was also faithfully convinced of the one all-important need for absolute propriety in the lives of women ; and she cherished the ideal of chastity as the holiest the world has to offer. She wore the White Cross on her breast ; and charity to evil-doers was as a black stain thrown across its virgin purity. Tears stood in her china-blue eyes—genuine tears of genuine distress. That the sweet lady of Kingshouse should advocate laxity in these matters was a

species of blasphemy which terrified and overcame her. She had always looked up to Lady Elizabeth with reverence, if her practical democracy had at times somewhat revolted her. But now, when she was not only consorting with sinners, but speaking gently of that fallen creature, and even excusing her and making light of the heinousness of her sin, Anne felt as if she must choose between man and God—human respect and divine guidance.

‘Some day you will come to a better knowledge,’ she said with quivering lips. ‘I will pray that you do.’

‘Perhaps, some day, taught by the lesson of suffering in the world, you will think with me—gently of sinners,’ said Lady Elizabeth in reply.

‘I hope—never!’ said Anne with fervour.

‘But you can at all events refrain from saying harsh things that she can hear. You remember the bruised reed and the smoking flax,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘She is very, very sad—her mind is a little unhinged—will you not spare her this pain, this indignity?’

‘If she were in a proper frame of mind, and truly repentant, I would,’ Anne answered. ‘But she is not, and she ought to be made to see her sin as it is. She is not really mad, I suppose? She can pray, can she not? and God can give His grace even to an idiot, if He will.’

‘Then let God judge her. We have only to soothe and help her,’ Lady Elizabeth replied, as she turned away and went back to Estelle.

‘What has she been saying to you? What have you been talking about all this time?’ were Estelle’s two questions, put rapidly and feverishly on her friend’s return.

‘Nothing of consequence,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘We had a great deal to talk about that meant nothing and ended in nothing.’

‘A bitter, black-hearted rigmaree, that’s what she is!’ muttered Caleb to himself, chafing at his own inability to help and avenge Estelle by telling Mrs. Medlicott what he thought of her. ‘Not fit to hold a candle to her, isn’t she; and she daring to drag her over the coals like that. She wants coaling herself, that does she!’

‘I know why Anne Aspline hates me so much,’ then said Estelle, after a pause. ‘It is because mother would not visit them; and now that she is properly married, and I was not, she is glad to insult me. It is very simple.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Elizabeth, almost scared by the unwonted lucidity of her poor friend’s words.

‘But I do not care,’ continued Estelle; ‘for I did only what was right. It was my duty to go to Charlie when he wanted me, and I went. I did quite right, quite. Did I not, Liese, dear? I was quite right to leave Thrift, which I always hated—oh! how I hated that place!—and come to the Riviera with my poor darling when he wanted me—was I not?’

‘We will not discuss that now, dear,’ said Lady Elizabeth, weakly trafficking with her conscience for love’s sake.

‘But I want to discuss it!’ said Estelle with a child’s wilfulness. ‘And I want you to tell me, yes or no. Did I do wrong to go with Charlie when he wanted me? I was engaged to him long before I ever saw Mr. Harford; and

when I knew that he was alive, and he said I was to go with him, of course I did. What else could I do?—and why should I not? And I did what was right, did I not?

‘Whether I think you did right or wrong is nothing to either of us,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘My best answer is, “I am here to care for you and help you to get quite well.”’

‘But that dreadful girl who hates me so much has said such dreadful things!’ said Estelle.

‘Forget them, dear. While you have such friends as Mr. Stagg and myself let the rest go.’

‘And my darling who never leaves me!’ said Estelle softly, looking up into the blue vault above, where she did really and honestly believe Charlie, as a spirit, was hovering, having postponed his entrance into his inheritance of heaven to be near her.

‘And Mr. Harford, who wishes you only well,’ said Lady Elizabeth tentatively.

‘Oh!’ was the weary response; ‘do not talk of him! He is nothing to me, and I want to forget him. I have only one wish—that he will

divorce me, and then I shall be all Charlie's—all—all his—body, soul and name!"

'And he of no more value than a bit of mouse-ear chickweed,' thought Caleb Stagg to himself. 'And that queenly lass to have given herself away for a man not fit to tie her very shoe-string! Matty me! the pity of it all!'

After this rude blow, Estelle's mind went back to its clouded state, and she lost more than she had found of clearness and self-consciousness. Charlie had died sooner than need have been from the same cause; and Anne had, indeed, vindicated the claims of stern justice and righteous retribution. Poor Charlie had been of those who have courage enough to act on their opinions, but not strength enough to endure the punishment that follows. The insurgent has not necessarily a tough hide, and Charlie had been one of those wilful sensitives who take their own way, but wince and wither and die by the thorns which wound them. And now it had come to Estelle's turn, and her fibre proved no tougher than her dead lover's. Not all Lady Elizabeth's loving care, not all Caleb's humble devotion,

counteracted the shock of Anne's scorn. It was like the blast of the simoom over the palm-trees, and her mind sank into darkness and her soul went back to its dungeon. She passed whole days by Charlie's grave and obstinately refused to go anywhere else. If she did not go there, she would not go out at all, but would lie back in her chair, neither waking nor dozing, neither conscious nor unconscious, but in a strange kind of mental twilight wherein the world was not wholly blotted out nor yet distinctly beheld. Too feeble to need restraint, too strange to be allowed her liberty, she was in a pitiable state, and Lady Elizabeth's anxiety and sense of responsibility were heavy. Anthony was still unable to move; Mrs. Clanricarde would not come; and Lady Elizabeth had to be strong enough for the place, however painful its circumstances and onerous its duties. The nurse hired to share the anxieties of the moment was worse than useless. Estelle would not have her near her, and her very presence made the poor girl so violent that she was perforce put into the back-ground, while Lady Elizabeth's maid was a

timid young woman who had nerves of her own and was afraid of her own shadow. Thus the sweet Lily of Kingshouse had it all in her hands and on her shoulders ; and sometimes she wished that she could divide the burden with another.

Once she had a more than usual strain. The day was hot and stifling, and she fell asleep by Estelle, lying on her bed near her and holding her hand in hers. When she awoke she found herself alone. Estelle had crept away with that wonderful cunning of the partially insane, and had stolen from the house unseen of any. Caleb happened to be out of the way at the moment, and the coast was therefore clear. There was hot running and feverish excitement—messengers were sent off in various directions—and a considerable stir was made in the hotel, when Estelle re-appeared, as from a walk, bright-eyed, flushed, brisk, alert, far more so because more feverish than even in her best days, and no more like an invalid than Lady Elizabeth herself. When gently scolded by Lady Elizabeth, and asked where she had been and why

she had given them all this trouble and anxiety, she laughed in a buoyant way, and said she had been out for a little walk ; the day was fine, and she had a longing to be alone. So the escapade passed without more notice taken of it, and Lady Elizabeth did not know what it was that her charge held hidden in her breast—something which every now and then she touched as if to reassure herself it was there, and safe in her own possession.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW THEY MET AND PARTED.

ONE of the difficulties of the present position was Estelle's obstinate refusal to leave Mentone—where Charlie was buried and where his spirit still lived. There was not a doubt that she ought to be taken away. The only chance of mental rehabilitation was in change of scene and diversion of thought; but who could insist when she so passionately, so tempestuously refused? Lady Elizabeth had neither the nerve nor the power to carry a shouting and protesting maniac to the station; and if she had not, then certainly had Caleb even less than she. Left alone and not thwarted, Estelle was quiet enough, and fairly amenable to control; but to

be taken forcibly away would have roused into active mania what was now that dulled and brooding condition known technically as 'melancholia.'

Anthony could not come for yet a little while, and Mrs. Clanricarde would not, till certain toilette arrangements were completed. She could not go to Mentone a perfect fright and dowdy, as she said ; nor would she let that unlucky George go without her. So near to Monte Carlo, and he the born gambler he was, and she not there to hold the reins ? No, certainly not ! Lady Elizabeth confessed that Estelle was in fair physical health ; which was so far a relief. If her mind had gone a little astray, it would come right in time, and there was nothing to fear. Ever since that first (false) announcement of Charlie's death she had been warped and strained ; but she had done no harm to herself nor any other, and would not now. A few days more or less did not signify, and a perfect equipment did. So the mother contented herself with a few letters full of futile excuses to Lady Elizabeth, and waited until her cloaks

and bonnets and gowns should be sent home fit to wear.

But Estelle did not want her at all. Her one cry to Lady Elizabeth was: 'Keep my mother away, Liese! She would send me mad if she came! She was too wicked to my darling! I will never see her again!'—a cry which made Lady Elizabeth's path even more and more uncomfortable to walk on, and its issue more and more doubtful.

Meanwhile, Anthony's broken bone was healing apace, and would soon be well enough for him to take the journey with due care and precautions. And, after all, he was the proper person to come and make arrangements. He was the only one who had legal authority to act—the only one who could dispose of this poor wrecked life, or say what should be done with this more than widow and less than wife. Friendship may have influence, but friendship has no power; and there are times when we are grateful for the hard hand of the law which overcomes individuality, apportions responsibility, and denies personal freedom.

It was one of Estelle's bad days, when the working of her brain was even more than usually impeded. She was lying in bed, having refused to get up—and was in that state of semi-unconsciousness so well known to the watchers by these mournful bedsides. Her eyes were closed and she was silent and impassive. She could not be made to eat nor speak nor move; but remained there, with clenched teeth and close-shut eyes, neither asleep nor awake, neither conscious nor unconscious, and more like a living log—a breathing statue—than a fully vitalized human being. For the first time Lady Elizabeth's influence had wholly failed. Unmoved by her voice, untouched by her prayers, her commands, her endearments, Estelle kept herself almost entirely motionless and unresponsive; and only by a sudden movement of her head, or a quick, sharp glance, at rare intervals, from her half-opened eyes, did she show that she heard what was said or knew that some one was standing near her.

While she was standing there, her main desire

at this moment being that Estelle should rouse herself enough to take some soup, Lady Elizabeth heard the omnibus from the station clatter through the gates and draw up at the hotel door. Then she heard a voice she knew only too well, and a strange halting sound, like and yet unlike a human step, which came up the stairs and stopped at the door of their salon. A moment after Anthony Harford, on crutches, stumbled into the room into which Estelle's bed-room opened—to find only Caleb sitting rather in the shadow, listening for any sound that might seem to ask his assistance, while apparently occupied in verifying certain flowers got that morning in his early walk before Estelle had stirred or Lady Elizabeth was visible.

When Anthony came in, he started up in mingled trepidation and yet relief. Now that queenly lass would be lost to him and his days would be as days without sun or sky, but Lady Elizabeth would be relieved from the anxiety which was beginning to tell on her rather heavily. How Estelle would bear this meeting

remained to be seen. He hoped much but he feared more. Had he had the ordering of things, and she could have been content, he would have liked to carry her away to some distant place where no one should see her more—or to have the care of her here at Mentone with the full consent of all belonging to her. He knew, he said to himself, that he could manage her. If he might, he would, and he could make her almost happy. But his doing as he would was only absolute submission to every wish or fancy of hers—and to manage her was merely to adore her and obey her.

White, wan and lean, Anthony was but the shadow of his former self. He looked as if he had been drained by some vampire of all his blood—as if the day of his final reckoning had come. But his changed appearance was due more to mental distress than physical discomfort, and the anguish of the moment was in the pain of this meeting and the doubt of himself that it included. But this fellow, this creature, this usurper, roused the man's pride and passion, and, so far, did him good.

‘Who are you, and what are you doing here?’ he asked haughtily, speaking to Caleb as to a dog.

‘I am Caleb Stagg, from Kingshouse, and I am here to help Lady Elizabeth look after Mrs. Harford,’ said Caleb with a quiet patience that was in its own way dignity.

‘Where is she?’ returned Anthony, still speaking in the same rude, rough way. For indeed it wounded him sore to see this man here where he should have been and would, now that the villain who had wrought all this evil was dead, had it not been for this untoward accident.

‘In yonder,’ said Caleb, pointing to the door that stood ajar. ‘Lady Elizabeth is there with her.’

There was but one She for both these men, so unlike as they were and with such different claims; and for all her grandeur and goodness and charm and self-devotion the sweet Lily of Kingshouse was but the satellite where this other was the central star.

Estelle, with her eyes still shut and her lips

drawn close, seemed to hear and know nothing. Lady Elizabeth, her nerves strung and her senses all intensified, heard and knew all. It was as if she were in the room and saw as well as heard—Anthony's impatience, just touching on brutality; Caleb's self-control, that rose into dignity. She came through the doorway, laying her finger on her lip, and as she turned Estelle opened her eyes wide with a strange and—ah! for the lost beauty of mind which goes with the health of the brain!—a vicious smile, and touched something that was in the thick coils of her hair. Then she closed her eyes again and lay as still as before.

‘Speak softly,’ said Lady Elizabeth, making no more formal greeting. ‘She is so soon startled.’

‘Let me see her,’ said Anthony, his brows drawn low, his lips pressed close. ‘I will not frighten her.’

Lady Elizabeth, moving softly, went into the room, and Anthony prepared to follow her. But his crutches fell sharply on the uncarpeted floor, and he stopped, with an angry exclamation.

‘Let me help you, Mr. Harford, sir,’ said honest Caleb, coming forward with all his kindly nature roused to be of service to a fellow-man, but, above all, to be of service to one who loved her. ‘Lean on me for this side, and maybe one stick will be enough for the other. It will make less clatter.’

‘Thanks, yes,’ said Anthony, with by no means effusive gratitude for the service rendered.

Manlike, he was totally without gratitude for small services of temporary usefulness. Large ones he would pay back with his life if need be. But to lean on Caleb’s shoulder did not soften his heart to the ungainly interloper who had taken the place that should have been his; and he went into the room where Estelle was lying, mutely cursing his fate and all humanity with the passion and injustice of his unregenerate kind.

As they came up to the bedside and looked at that poor beautiful wreck—a more sorrowful victim of love than ever was Ophelia—Caleb felt the strong man leaning on him quiver like

an aspen leaf in the wind ; but he made no open demonstration. He neither groaned nor wept, nor yet spoke. He only trembled with the suppressed emotion of a passionate man used to control expression, and lightly laid his hand on hers.

Then Estelle, opening her eyes wide, fixed them on the faces of the two men standing by the side of her bed—Anthony in the full light and Caleb in the shadow—and as she looked she shrieked and covered her face in her hands.

‘Estelle—dear—do you know me?’ said Anthony very gently, bending over her; but she only shuddered and moaned, shutting out the sight as something too painful, too terrible to be borne.

‘Will you not speak to me, Estelle? Dearest! are you afraid of me? There is nothing to fear! Darling—speak to me. Oh, my love! look at me once more with those dear eyes and tell me you do not hate me!’

He said all this at intervals, softly—his passion, his despair of entreaty, rising as the time went by and she still hid her face and moaned.

‘One word, my Estelle!’ continued Anthony, who, by now, had lost all memory of her sin and of his own anger and dark resolves—whose heart had gone back to her again with all its former integrity of love—and who had determined that, come what might, he would take her in his hand before the world, and rehabilitate her by his love. He was man enough to face the world and overcome it! ‘One word,’ he pleaded. ‘Tell me that you are glad I have come, and that you will go back with me to Thrift and your child.’ He forcibly took her hand from her face—that long, soft, perfumed hand, and carried it to his lips. ‘Oh, my darling! will you not speak to me one word?’ he said with a sob. ‘Not one look to the man who loves you?’

Then Estelle uncovered her face and looked at him with sudden gentleness.

‘Poor Anthony, do not cry,’ she said simply.

He kissed her hand again. Judge and criminal—it was the judge who sued and the criminal who granted.

‘But I have found you now, and we will be

happy together again,' he said, his very soul in his voice.

She shuddered visibly, and looked appealingly at Lady Elizabeth. Her one conscious thought was to stay here, where Charlie's grave held Charlie's heart, and was the altar where she worshipped.

'Do you not want to see your boy?' then asked Anthony; 'your little son? He has grown now, Estelle; he is a big boy, so like you! We teach him your name. He has not forgotten you. Do you not wish to see him again?'

'No,' said Estelle. 'He was yours, not mine. He is better without me.'

Tears gathered into Anthony's eyes. Hers were dry.

'How can a child be better without its mother?' he said tenderly. 'How much better he will be with you, you mean, my darling! How we are all longing for you again!'

Again she shuddered.

'Ask Anne Aspline,' she said.

It was curious how rational, alive, coherent she had become. Her face was flushed, her

large eyes were feverishly bright, her whole being seemed strung and stirred. She was herself and yet not herself. Her mind was no longer clouded and oppressed and yet it was not sane nor healthy. Not the living log—the organized statue—she was more like an incarnate flame, self-consuming and self-destroying. Yet none of the dear people around her—all loving her as they did, but all inexperienced in the phases of her malady—feared the consequences of this sudden re-action. On the contrary, they rejoiced in her renewed lucidity, and even Lady Elizabeth did not read the signs aright.

‘But why am I in bed, Liese?’ she asked.

‘I am quite well. Let me get up. Let me go out. I am well. Why am I kept here?’

‘You shall get up, darling,’ said her friend.
‘It is better for you.’

Lady Elizabeth did not remind her that it was by her own wilful refusal to rise and dress that she was here to-day, as now for some days past. She was too glad to see the signs of improvement, as she read them, to argue about responsi-

bilities. So Estelle's new wish was gratified, and she dressed and came into the sitting-room before Anthony had got rid of the traces of his journey and had refreshed himself as Englishmen do.

All that day Estelle was in the same state—vivid, alert, feverish—insane. But with the preternatural cunning of insanity she concealed her state with the skill of a finished actress, and no one but an expert would have seen her real condition behind her assumed brightness and responsiveness. Her eyes, however, would have betrayed her to those who could read them. Unsteady, quick, suspicious, watchful, they had in them all the well-known distrust and slyness of her state, and belied the more favourable symptoms of her lucid speech. Hers only in shape and colour, they had not a trace of their former expression. They were the eyes of a maniac with just so much conscious intelligence as enabled her to feign for better concealment. She startled Anthony, and more than startled him, by saying suddenly, abruptly, with nothing to lead up to it :

‘When I left Thrift I went to Mary Crosby’s, and hid there for years, I think. She is Mrs. Latimer’s daughter, and gave us money. They were cheating us at home, and bribed me to keep the secret.’

Then she laughed, in a mindless, foolish way, with a note of maliciousness in the discord.

Nothing that she could have said would have so disturbed her hearers as this apparent cynicism. How changed she was to be able to make this shameless confession!

‘How long were you there?’ asked Anthony, turning away his eyes.

She glanced at him furtively, and a look of suspicion came over her face.

‘I do not remember,’ she said shortly; and for some time after this relapsed into silence and would not speak.

So the day wore on, and nightfall came. Anthony had not been able to speak to Lady Elizabeth apart, and Caleb had wandered away into the hills, like one whose work was done. He was no longer wanted; and he felt an obstacle, an encumbrance, where so lately he had

been the guardian and preserver. But Estelle evidently missed him, and looked round the room and to the door more than once, not saying what she wanted, but showing that she was uneasy about something. When he returned towards evening she looked pleased, but did not speak, and Lady Elizabeth—Anthony notwithstanding—said kindly, to give him pleasure, the poor *omadhaun*!—

‘We have missed you, Mr. Stagg, and so has our dear invalid.’

‘I am glad that I am not only a nuisance, Lady Elizabeth,’ said Caleb, blushing to the tips of his ears. ‘I thought I might be in the way, and so just took myself off that you might be shot of me.’

‘We owe you too much to ever find you a nuisance or in the way,’ she replied with great kindness. ‘Why! what should we have done without you?’

‘I am main glad,’ said Caleb; and even Anthony understood the unselfish devotion which lifted the miner’s son out of the category of men of whom to be jealous, and put him into that of sexless saints.

When the night had fully come and the activities of the day were over, Estelle got up and went over to Lady Elizabeth.

‘I am tired, Liese,’ she said abruptly. ‘I am going to bed.’

‘Very well, dear, I will go with you,’ was the answer. ‘We do not leave her,’ she said, turning to Anthony. ‘Either I or the maid is always with her.’

‘I will watch by her to-night,’ said Anthony in his authoritative way.

Estelle clutched at Lady Elizabeth’s dress like a child.

‘No, Liese,’ she said.

‘Perhaps——’ began Lady Elizabeth.

‘I wish it,’ said Anthony; and no more was to be said.

It was his will, and he had the right—was he not her master by the law? His heart was heavy as lead, and his hopes had died down almost as soon as they had sprung up. His Dead-Sea apple had proved its bitterness. The light of his life was quenched; the woman he had loved and still loved—the woman whom he

would have taken back in the face of the world—was but a living death, whose heart was in the grave of another. Nevertheless, he would watch by her to-night—tenderly as a mother by the cradle of her first-born—carefully as a miser guarding his treasure—mournfully as one who watches the dead. And when to-morrow came he would decide on his plans. In any case, these included an immediate return to England and the advice of experts. He would not believe that her state was irremediable. By judicious treatment her mental health and moral sanity would be restored, and years of happiness were yet before him. If the neighbours looked coldly on her, he would leave Thrift and go where their sad story was not known. She should never be reminded of her fault. It had been grave and damnable, but she had not been to blame. She had been weak, not wicked; that scoundrel who, fortunately for himself, had died before vengeance had overtaken him, was the only one to blame. So he sat and thought, watching her pale impassive face for hours into the night—when,

overpowered by the heat of the silent night, by the fatigue of travel and the exhaustion consequent on his own emotions, his head sank on the bed beside her own and he fell heavily asleep.

Then Estelle opened her eyes and looked at him first with a shudder and then with a smile. She slid her hand in among her coils of hair, dragging them from their fastenings as she took therefrom a small phial which she uncorked, with a curiously tender, almost loving touch.

‘They shall not separate us, Charlie!’ she said softly to herself, her eyes strained to the ceiling of the room, while she drank the contents of that little bottle to the last drop.

She was smiling, and her face had a rapt, ecstatic look; for there, visible to her eyes, she saw the face of the one she loved—beautified, glorified, freed from all trace of suffering and disease—looking at her with love, while his hands were held out as if to receive her. Then—still smiling—her eyes still fixed—a change came over her. Her heart ceased to beat; her blood ceased to flow; what visions or what thoughts

possessed her no man could know, for the thing we call the life had gone, and she lay on the bed motionless and dead.

When Anthony awoke he found her stiff and cold. Her eyes were still opened wide and her lips were parted with a smile. Her curling hair fell over the pillow and her arms like a dusky cloud; and in her white hand, with the long and taper fingers still crossed, was hidden a little bottle drained to the last drop and smelling of bitter almonds. By this she had secured the swift passage she desired; and by this she had passed from the night of her bondage to the glad day of her release.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNMASKED.

MARY CROSBY, for the most part ready for any emergency, was at the end of her resources. Mrs. Latimer had been inconsiderate enough to have an attack of congestion of the lungs, which necessitated careful examination by the doctor, threatened fatal consequences, and made it absolutely necessary for one who was only a servant to adopt an above-board and straight-forward kind of behaviour. A nurse was insisted on by the medical man, and Mary was ordered to communicate her state to Mrs. Latimer's natural belongings. When he was told the old lady's reputed age the doctor gave the chronicler

the lie direct and docked off twenty years at a blow.

‘She was no more past eighty than he was,’ he said scornfully ; wondering what was at the back of the fraud ; angry that such a cheat should have been sought to be played off on him ; indignant that he should have been taken for a fool. What did it mean ? Why should this woman of sixty odd, and vigorous for her age, seek to make herself twenty years older ? and why should the hands of one, presumably a lady, show the ineffaceable signs of hard work and rough usage ? A mystery was behind these appearances ; and he went to Mr. Trotter for such insight as he could give. As the clergyman who had so frequently paid his official visits and administered godly consolation, he might have some clue. But Mr. Trotter was a student whose books had given him lore, not knowledge, and he was of no use as an adjutant detective. Nevertheless, he was brought to a proper state of doubt and suspicion, and Mary knew that the net was closing round her.

Not to send word to the Clanricardes was to

confess to the packed cards and loaded dice of her game. To have them here—even that foolish George—was to be discovered, as sure as fate. But the doctor insisted, the clergyman exhorted, the nurse refused the responsibility; and like the general stir which sent the pig over the stile and the old woman to her supper when the dog began to worry the cat, and the cat began to eat the rat, the pressure of events was too strong for the obstructing sentinel, and the Clanricardes had to be communicated with. The letter was sent just at the time when Mrs. Clanricarde, her toilette finally completed, was preparing to go over to Mentone, but was hindered by the news of Estelle's sudden death—which she wept over as heart-breaking and characterized as inconvenient. The waste of money involved in the purchase of clothes which could not be worn for a year—when the *façon* would have passed—and in the further outlay for mourning, pressed heavily on a purse never too well filled. So that, when she read Mary Crosby's letter, and found that old Mrs. Latimer was dangerously ill, the sense of hope and relief

which it brought went far to mitigate her sorrow by reducing the weight of its inconvenience.

‘You must go at once, George,’ said Mrs. Clanricarde to her husband, speaking in her sharp, peremptory way.

‘And you, my Louise?’ he asked amiably, turning his other cheek, as was his wont.

At first she answered No, she would not go. There was no necessity for it. She disliked the act of travelling, and there was nothing to be got by this journey. If Mrs. Latimer died—she died, and they would come in for the money. But then she reflected that perhaps the servant might lay pilfering hands on unconsidered trifles, which that foolish George would never see, and which it needed a woman of perspicacity to discover. So she suddenly resolved on going too; and she made her husband understand how great the effort was and how direful she felt the necessity to be, all owing to his ingrained stupidity.

To which he answered rather drily: ‘What

a pity your mother blundered, my Louise! She spoilt the making of a man in you.'

'Yes,' said Louise as drily. 'A better man than I have found in you.'

'To my sorrow,' said George.

'To something more than sorrow with me,' was her reply, in her high-pitched, shrill French voice, with its irritated inflection and its accent of complaint.

But as quarrelling did not mend matters, they were forced to come to the truce of concerted action, and to set off together to Thorbergh—Mr. Clanricarde to look after the money part of the business and Mrs. Clanricarde to secure the plate and linen and ornaments and furniture, and so make sure that the pickings of the confidential servant were not in any way excessive.

When they arrived at the house they were met by Mary Crosby, who opened the door to them and ushered them into the front drawing-room. By an effort of reason against inclination she had made a fire in the grate, though the day

was warm and fully up to its date. But she knew that people off a journey are generally chilly ; and, for all that she would willingly have done both these intruders to death, she laid herself out to conciliate them by every attention she could devise. Duels are none the less deadly when conducted with courtesy ; and this was Mary Crosby's thought if put into different words. Hence she paid these two enemies—greater enemies than they themselves yet knew—the most flattering court, and at a bound won that foolish George's heart and established herself therein as a really good and superior person. Mrs. Clanricarde was more cautious. She could read better than could her husband ; and the hidden nature of this resolute, hard-visaged woman, with the square jaw, compressed lips, searching eyes, and general hardness of demeanour, was scarcely in accord with her soft words and more than courteous attentions. Being in this disaccord, her cares awakened more suspicion than they gave pleasure.

Questioned about Mrs. Latimer, she had the

melancholy intelligence to give of imminent danger and extreme debility. When she said this she put her apron to her eyes and shed genuine tears, while Mr. and Mrs. Clanricarde looked at each other, and not even that soft-hearted George could find fit words of condolence on the spur of the moment. They came after consideration, but only after consideration. But really even he thought that an old creature, long past eighty, who had been standing for the last ten years in the shoes which he wanted to wear, and which were rightfully his, had had long enough innings, and that the time had come when she ought to retire. He murmured, however, something that sounded like pity and condolence; but Mary caught the pretence in his voice, and noted the silence of Mrs. Clanricarde, and wondered, in a rapid kind of way, whether she should escape detection if she were to put arsenic in their tea and so throw them off the scent for ever—that scent which was now so burning!

‘Has Mrs. Latimer left a will?’ asked Mrs.

Clanricarde, taking up a bit of common china and looking round the room to note what ornaments of value might be there.

For the old man had been a bric-à-brac collector, and especially noted for his bronzes and old china. At present neither costly bronze nor valuable china adorned the shelves of this hard, cold, uncomfortable room. It was filled, but with the poorest and commonest stuff imaginable—certainly not the bric-à-brac likely to be collected by a clever virtuoso.

‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ Mary answered. ‘She has never talked much to me about her affairs.’

‘Where are the bronzes and old china my cousin collected?’ then inquired Mr. Clanricarde.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ was the glib reply. ‘When we left London Mrs. Latimer had them all packed up and sent away. I know nothing more of them.’

‘Are they warehoused or at the bank?’ asked George.

‘That I really can’t say, sir,’ answered Mary.

But you were her confidential servant,’ said Mrs. Clanricarde sharply.

‘A servant is never really in the confidence of her mistress,’ answered Mary demurely. ‘Ladies like Mrs. Latimer tell us little things, but not great ones; and I know no more of my lady’s affairs than you do. And not so much,’ she added without a blush.

‘It is very odd,’ then said Mrs. Clanricarde, more and more uneasy and suspicious, seeing in this absence of costly art-treasures the first act of denudation. ‘I cannot understand it.’

‘Perhaps she has left some notice—some instruction,’ said Mary, ‘She has a lot of papers, I know.’

‘Where?’ asked Mrs. Clanricarde.

‘In a box upstairs,’ said Mary.

So there were—old love-letters and business papers relating to the early lives of the dead and gone Latimers, but of aught that should be of use or prove a clue in the present condition

of things, not a trace. Not even a cheque-book nor a banker's book shed light on receipts, savings, or expenditure; and when things came to be looked into—of the last quarter's annuity not more than five pounds were left for current expenses. But Mary's housekeeping expenses were correct to the last farthing; and each week tallied with the amount set down with scrupulous fidelity, as 'Received from Mrs. Latimer £2,' or '£2 10s,' sometimes '£3,' and for a long time so much as £5, or even more was balanced on the other side by so much paid out for bread, meat, milk, and vegetables.

'Why is this so high?' asked Mrs. Clanricarde when she glanced over the book.

'Mrs. Latimer had two young friends,' said Mary with consummate self-possession. 'They came and stayed here for a couple of months or more.'

'Who were they?' was the next question.

Mary hesitated for a moment; then she suddenly decided on her line of action. She had never been quite sure what she should do if

this question were put to her—whether she should boldly confess, and so, as it were, bribe the father and mother to silence, or gloss it over into an insignificant visit of indifferent people. She did not know that Estelle was dead, and Mrs. Clanricarde's mourning might mean anyone beside a daughter. Acting then on half knowledge, she made a bold move, and said quietly :

‘Mr. Charles Osborne, ma’am, and young Mrs. Harford.’

‘Infamous wretch ! and you say this to me, her mother, to my face !’ cried Mrs. Clanricarde, rising and facing the woman standing there calm, a little sneering, malicious, triumphant.

‘I could not let them starve,’ said Mary tossing up her head. ‘They had no money, and Mrs. Latimer took them in out of pure compassion. If their own deserted them, and left them on the streets, Mrs. Latimer was too kind to do so too. That was how the money went, Mrs. Clanricarde ; and more to the back

of the weekly bills, I can tell you! Those two nearly ruined my poor mistress, and took, to my knowledge, every halfpenny she had saved. And she had saved something that would have come in handy now with all these expenses about.'

'Wretches!' said Mrs. Clanricarde, strongly agitated. 'I shall give you in charge of the police, Mary. You shall be put in prison as sure as you are alive.'

'Very well, ma'am,' said Mary. 'And let the whole story come out in open court? I am willing, I am sure. I have done nothing to be ashamed of, and if you, a mother, choose to bring the story forward, I'll not back out of it. But I'd warn you to think twice before you do. It's an ugly story at the best.'

'Leave the room, you wretch, you sinful and abominable woman!' cried Mrs. Clanricarde; and Mary, saying as her parting shot: 'And this is the gratitude of the quality!' beat a speedy retreat, glad to be relieved from the heckling she had undergone.

As she went out of the room she met the doctor and the nurse coming down the stairs.

‘It is all over,’ they said. ‘The poor lady has gone.’

Mary gave a sharp cry.

‘I should have so liked to see her again!’ she said passionately weeping. ‘She was always a good mistress to me! I should have liked to see her once more.’

‘Too late now,’ said the doctor; and ‘She is in heaven,’ added the nurse.

‘She deserved it, if anyone ever did,’ said Mary sobbing; and the doctor, with a half-smile in his eyes, went into the room to inform Mr. and Mrs. Clanricarde, the nearest of kin and the deceased lady’s heirs, of the demise of their relation who passed for over eighty and was certainly fifteen years younger, and whose hands bore the traces of hard work and rough usage.

Then said Mrs. Clanricarde, enlightened as by a sudden revelation :

‘George, we have been robbed! Call the police. This woman was not Mrs. Latimer, and Mary Crosby is a thief!’

CHAPTER XIV.

AT BAY.

THE game was up, but Mary stood her ground.

‘You may do your worst,’ she said defiantly, when she was haled before the authorities assembled in the drawing-room; ‘and your worst will not do you much good.’

As yet the police had not been sent for. That foolish George had persuaded his irate Louise to wait until Anthony Harford should come to give his sanction. For the disclosures to be made touched him more nearly than they touched even the father and mother; and the ridicule that would attach to a man whose wife had hidden herself away with her lover in one

of her husband's own houses, while he was dragging rivers and searching old mines for her dead body, was more to be dreaded than the obloquy that would fall on parents who had sold their daughter for so much money, cash down.

'We will see about that,' said Anthony grimly.

'Now that mother has gone, I care nothing about any of you,' said Mary, slightly snapping her fingers. 'I kept her warm and comfortable for her lifetime, and I can do my seven years, or even ten, if need be, now I am by myself.'

'You are a shameless wretch!' said Mrs. Clanricarde, almost tearful from anger.

'Shameless yourself!' retorted Mary, flinging back the words like a bullet. 'Me and mother didn't sell a poor young lady for money to a man she cared no more for than a sack of potatoes. We didn't make a fine young gentleman dead when he wasn't, and bring a heap of misery and misfortune to everyone all round.'

‘Silence, woman!’ thundered Anthony, his face as dark as a demon’s.

‘No, Mr. Harford, sir,’ said Mary; ‘it is no time now for silence. You and yours have got to hear the truth. If I have to fight for my life, I’ll fight all I know, as anybody would who’d got it to do. I am sorry to hurt you; but you’ll have to be hurt.’

‘What excuse can you make, you wretched creature, you thief, for cheating us out of the money that belonged to us all these years!’ cried Mrs. Clanricarde, still almost beside herself from the mortified rage of one who has been balked and dispossessed.

‘What excuse? A sight better than you can give for your selling of your daughter,’ said Mary. ‘We kept Master Charlie for years, did we; and we kept Mr. Harford’s wife for months more. It was we as paid for everything—their food here, Mrs. Harford’s very boots and underlinen, and for all their expenses out there. We kept them, I say, and did better with the money than any of you would, I reckon.’

‘That does not make it less a theft, Mary,’ said George Clanricarde mildly.

Some one had to speak, and it seemed his turn.

‘That may be, sir,’ said Mary a little less insolently; ‘but it makes a difference how you use the money. We lived poorly, did mother and me, and all we saved we gave to Master Charlie to let him marry Miss Estelle; or to Mrs. Harford when she ran away.’

This was not true, but it served its purpose as well as if it had been. That good fat sum at last taken out of the mattress and invested in Consols, the bond whereof was deposited in the county bank, under the name of Molly Dance, could have told a different story had anyone known of it.

‘How dare you speak of Mrs. Harford!’ said Anthony in a white heat. ‘Mrs. Harford dependent on you!’

‘Truth is truth, sir,’ Mary answered sullenly. ‘Your good lady had no one else to see her through her trouble, and we did, did mother and

me. I don't think we deserve bally-ragging from any of you for that same,' she added with a false air of incipient whimpering. 'She came to us, poor young lady, in her trouble. What were we to do? Turn her out into the streets, or take care of her? Mother and me, we talked it over, but we thought it would be a treacherous sort of thing to do to turn her back, when she had trusted us. So we kept her secret, and no one was the wiser. It's not everyone would have done so much, though I says it as shouldn't.'

'No,' returned Mrs. Clamricarde with a virtuous scoff. 'It is not every honest woman that would have harboured a runaway wife and her paramour.'

'They did kindly,' said that foolish George, his restless eyes full of tears.

'They did damnably,' said Anthony warmly.

'And you would have had us betray Master Charlie, who was like my own?' fired up Mary. 'You would have us send for you, and let you do with that poor young gentleman what you

would, and treat that poor young lady like a Tory? No, Mr. Harford, sir, I know my duty to God and my neighbours better than that and I hope I shall always be done by as I have done to others.'

'Your duty to God!' flamed out Anthony.
'Your duty to the devil, you mean!'

There was silence. If Mary's eloquence had not reached the hearts of her hearers, the father's emotion had at least shamed the mother to quiescence, and Anthony's large words had removed from his bosom some of his own perilous stuff. For all his momentary excitement against the woman who had harboured his wife in her sin, he was substantially softened to the deed. Remembering what he had felt in the early days, he knew that Mary and her mother had kept him from committing a crime and had saved two lives—if but for more prolonged suffering. He felt, moreover, that all his dirty linen had best be washed at home. To give Mary into custody and to have her committed for trial would be to flood the world with scandal-

ous details, at once ridiculous and nauseous. It would be better to compound the felony and let her go free.

For all that he was a magistrate, and so far bound to obey the law he administered, Anthony's American experience had made him more individual than social; and he was 'mafioso' to the extent of liking to settle his affairs with his own right hand, rather than have them settled for him by judge and jury, and afterwards analyzed by the press.

His difficulty at the present moment was not to let Mary see that he was inclined to her deliverance for fear of the world's talk and for the instinct of self-preservation; but to wrap up the truth in an opaque envelope of part gratitude for the care taken of his erring wife, part consideration for the woman herself, *quâ* woman, and so recently afflicted. It was impossible for him to show the truth. How often, indeed, can any of us?

Mary was the first to break the silence. As astute as she was insolent, she saw the situation

clearly enough, and she would let them know that she saw it.

‘I am not afraid of my share,’ she said after a pause; ‘and I don’t think the townspeople would blame me. Master Charlie had been as my own, as one may say, and I cared for him as my own. There was no harm in helping him with money to marry the young lady he fancied; and I was not bound to send back Mrs. Harford to her husband. No one will say that. Queer as it may seem that a poor servant like me should be called on to provide, down to her very slips and shoe-leather, for the rich Squire Harford’s wife, still no one will blame me; and I can go to gaol because I helped my betters, as many a one has gone before me for no worser crime than that.’

‘You are a brazen hussy,’ said Mrs. Clanricarde, who could not get over the pain of knowing that she had been cheated for all these years of her rightful income after Mrs. Latimer’s decease, and who, failing restitution, thought she ought to have revenge. ‘You are a

brazen hussy, and you ought to be on the treadmill.'

'Maybe,' said Mary speaking rapidly; 'but before I go I'll tell the truth, and that I warn you. They shall hear it all from the beginning. Master Charlie's death, that was never a death; and the back word come on Mrs. Harford's very wedding-day itself, and no one man enough to tell her; and how she came to me when she found her old jo was alive; how me and mother took her in and kept her and Master Charlie for months and months did we, and Squire Harford there at Thrift, rolling in golden guineas, as one might say:—I'll not let a word go for want of telling. I'm ready if you are.'

'Leave the room, woman,' said Anthony sternly. 'By George, you tempt me to forget myself.'

And Mary, knowing that her case was gained, with a significant glance at Anthony Harford's crutches, as one should say, 'Who's afraid?' hurried from the room, and went down into the kitchen. And when there she partially

opened the front of her dress and felt her stays which crackled under her hand, lined as they were with bank-notes and banker's vouchers.

'Them's safe,' she said to herself with a sigh of satisfaction; 'and I'll get more out of them skinflints, or I'm a Dutchman. They've got to bribe me to hold my tongue. I'm not afraid of what they can say of me. Mr. Harford, who's as proud as Lucifer, would he like to have it known that his runaway wife was hiding here under his very nose in his own house, beholden to such as we? That old she-cat may screech as much as she likes, she can do nothing. I've no call to be afraid of her.'

And she spoke truth. Circumstances compelled them to adopt, so far, a conciliatory course, and let this arch offender go. She was free to depart when she would—she and her boxes. Her boxes, by the way, were rigidly overhauled, but not 'so much as a candle-end,' as she said, was found in them; and, for want of documents, no trace of moneys received by

the sale of bronzes, china, and the like, and safely invested in secure shares, were forthcoming. All was a blank, save the huge lump sums set down in Mrs. Latimer's day-book, where the housekeeping expenses were ridiculously small and the subsidies granted to Mr. Charles Osborne as monstrously large.

‘And this,’ said Mary, holding out a purse in which a florin, a bent shilling, and a crooked sixpence were all the coins it contained; ‘and this is all the reward I am to have for what I have done?’

‘You have that and an escape from gaol,’ said Anthony Harford sternly.

‘And you, and Mrs. Clanricarde, and the whole lot of you, that of the story not coming out in the papers,’ said Mary in reply, defiant to the last. ‘But I have not enough to pay my railway fare; and at least my wages are due.’

‘Here!’ said Anthony Harford, flinging her a bank-note as one flings a bone to a dog.

She took it and curtsied. The conventional

action recalled the conventional manner. Then with a saucy 'Good-morning' all round, she went off with her boxes in a cab, and no one asked or knew where.

'I am glad that mother has gone, poor soul,' she said, as she sank back in the corner of the railway-carriage and wept genuine tears—the strain now relieved. 'She'd never have faced it, never! She'd have broken down as sure as eggs is eggs: but I have more grit in me than she had, poor soul; and I am glad that she was spared.'

So she passed into darkness as black as that of interstellar space, and no one ever recognized in the sober, well-conducted Molly Dance—Sunday-school teacher of the Methodist chapel on the outskirts of —, the county town—the woman who had acted for ten years and more a living lie, and whose mother had personated a dead lady to draw her income and make it into a sufficient annuity for her daughter's lifetime.

'She ought to have been prosecuted,' said

Mrs. Clanricarde, when the thing was over and done with.

‘She’s best left alone,’ said Anthony Harford.

‘And she was kind to my poor Estelle,’ chimed in that foolish George.

‘And it would have been better for everyone if she had not been,’ snapped Mrs. Clanricarde, her shrill voice at its highest pitch.

Her husband looked at her with a strange expression of mingled fear and aversion. Anthony’s face showed only the aversion without the fear.

‘Let the dead bury their dead,’ he said sternly. ‘If virtue could be measured like land, perhaps some of our acres would not fetch much. Now that you have your income, Mrs. Clanricarde, perhaps you can afford to be generous to the victim you yourself made.’

‘If I made her you took her, victim or not,’ retorted Mrs. Clanricarde. ‘You hold yourself high, Anthony Harford; that poor uncouth Caleb Stagg towers head and shoulders above you.’

With which Parthian shaft she swept away,
even as Mary had done, and this history knows
her no more.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DAWN OF DAY.

THE pendulum of human life beats with constant regularity, and the sum of happiness or misery is pretty equally maintained if not evenly distributed. On the one side we have sorrow, madness, death—on the other, fulfilled ambition, radiant hopes, delighted love, a brilliant future. By the average—the most disappointing of all the equations made by facts and figures—those who have drawn blanks have nothing to complain of, seeing that their neighbours hold the prizes—that those prizes are of sufficient quality and number—and that thus the general average is maintained.

There were the Smythe Smiths, for instance ; what a handful of prizes they had drawn ! and of what a fine unclouded blue their sky was painted ! This marriage with Lady Venetia put the coping-stone on the pleasant edifice of their fortunes. It gave just the clamp and mortar they wanted to consolidate their holding, and clasped them to the Upper Ten as by adoption, if not by inheritance. It was the culmination of their hopes and the last fortress they had set themselves to win. What more remained to be conquered would be revealed in time. For that truth, so well known to mountain climbers—for further peaks still for ever revealing themselves as this and this are gained—is as true to the ambitious, whose last attainment is only a stepping-stone to another endeavour.

The wedding had been a gorgeous affair, for the bridegroom had been generous and the bride's parents were not too sensitive. If money be the chief factor in a transaction, what folly it is to pretend disinterestedness and to act coyly ! And, to do the Lacklands justice, they did not err on that line by a hair's-breadth, but accepted

the relief proffered by their future son-in-law as graciously as it was offered, and liked him all the better for his munificence. After the wedding, the young people had gone off for a tour round the world in the famous yacht of former days which once had borne away poor Charlie Osborne. She had been redecorated and overhauled from keel to topmast, and was now one of the best and safest and most comfortable of her kind. And as, fortunately for every one, Lady Venetia was a good sailor and not a coward, the trip had been a success, and no regrets were added as footnotes to the text.

A year had passed since this bright chapter had been written in the Golden Book of Upperfold—a year which had been to Anthony Harford one of blackest gloom, now beginning to shade off into a lighter but still sufficiently dismal tone. Lady Elizabeth had not been to Thorbergh since the catastrophe of Estelle's death; and no event of any importance had broken the monotony of his dull days. Still he lived on with a kind of undefined hope at the

back of his consciousness, as one who sees a ray of light—unformed, but always light—at the end of a dark alley. He knew that life had not exhausted all its joys for him, and that Fortune would not always be the jade she had shown herself of late.

The honeymoon had repeated itself twelve times, and the month had lengthened out into a year, when Lawrence Smythe Smith and his young wife returned to England—to cast anchor for a time at Upperfold until they had decided on their own special moorings. The rejoicings over the return of the son and heir were to be of the most resplendent kind; and the programme, as drawn out by the London organizer hired to give form to the feelings of the Smythe Smiths, was eminently satisfactory. Our cousins across the Atlantic put this tangible shaping of their feelings in a very crude form, and: ‘How much are you sorry for?’ in the subscription-list of a charity has its analogue in the ‘How much are you glad for?’ in the outlay of a welcome.

Mr. and Mrs. Smythe Smith were glad for a very large sum indeed, and the neighbourhood

would be the gainer. Games, shows, all sorts of diversions in the park would please the trivial minds of the simple and untutored. A tenants' dinner would appeal to their more solid appreciation. A children's tea, with useful gifts for wear and toys as the lighter fringes, would be a fair bid for a generation of popularity ; and the fireworks at night would delight all alike. In the house, a stately banquet was arranged for friends and guests of equal standing, to be followed by a ball and an illuminated garden. It was a programme that did infinite credit to the organizer all through ; and it was sure not to be marred by injudicious economies. Mr. and Mrs. Smythe Smith were glad of their son's return by a very handsome sum indeed ; and, never parsimonious, they were now truly regal in their output.

Among those to be asked as intimates, and of course, were the Kingshouses. The days were passed when this intimacy had been the bluest of all their blue ribands to the Smythe Smiths ; but they still cherished a warm and kindly feeling, just edged with bygone gratitude, for

the family which, first of all their then social superiors, had stretched out the right hand of fellowship to them, and treated them as autochthones, not sojourners. There was, perhaps, the finest shade of difference in their tone towards them—but it was very fine, very delicate, and the Kingshouses were not susceptible. So Mrs. Smythe Smith wrote a warm and pressing letter of invitation, feeling that if Lord Kingshouse would come on their side he would match Lord Lackland's and Lady Venetia's and keep the balance equal. My lady, too, colourless and important as she was in person, would be of value in name; and Lady Elizabeth was always a safe card to play. She had been 'booked' from the beginning—Mrs. Smythe Smith always having her eyes fixed on probabilities. She remembered certain things which made her see ulterior chances. Wait till the year was out, and then——

Since Estelle's death Lady Elizabeth had neither visited the Smythe Smiths nor seen Anthony Harford. Something as indefinite as the hope lying at the back of his consciousness

had held her from coming to Thorbergh during this first year of his widowerhood. She had kept up a kindly and continuous, but not frequent, correspondence with him, which had given her thoughts occupation; but he had never said he wanted to see her until now, when the great fête-day was fixed, and he knew that she was coming to Upperfold. Then he broke out into a curious little dithyramb of joy at the prospect of meeting her again, and even added the hope that she would stay a long time at Upperfold—for his sake. He missed her, he said, out of his life; and he was looking forward to the pleasure of her society with a schoolboy's delight. A year was a long time for the separation of two faithful friends—and faithful friends they had been from the first and would be to the end. But for the painful memories hanging about Kingshouse—but for his abhorrence of one of the people at Les Saules and his contempt for the other—he would have gone over long ago to see her—Lady Elizabeth—the Delight of his Long Ago. But, as things were, the effort would be too great, and even he was not given to

needless self-torture. It would be all right when she should be here, and they were able once more to talk face to face, as in the happy days of their first acquaintance.

And when Lady Elizabeth read this letter she first blushed for joy, and then for shame of that joy; and hid it in her bosom with a strange feeling of sacred possession and a sense of divine secrecy, like some great splendour of thought shared between her and God. But alas! for that second blush! When she went to bed she took the letter out of her bosom and kissed it with a passion, a self-abandonment, which no one who knew her only from the outside would have recognized as her characteristic at all.

‘I know that I love him,’ she said to herself. ‘I always have. I should be ashamed to confess this—but I am not ashamed! I cannot feel sorry for myself. It is so natural to love him! Now that he is alone—poor, poor Estelle!—there is no sin in it. There was not at the first, and there is not now. Ah! if he could care for me, so that I might make him happy and build

up his home again.—Ah!’ she said with passion, and here her voice broke into audible sound; ‘would that I could!’

So far Lady Elizabeth proved herself no child of this strange, cold, calculating generation. She was not ashamed to still love, having been so far cheated by appearances in the beginning as to imagine herself sought when she was only observed. She had not been sought. Anthony’s path had branched off from hers, and he had followed another, not herself. Nevertheless, she still stood where she had been when he had left her for Estelle; and the love she had given she had never recalled. It had been covered down and hidden out of sight while Estelle lived. For one moment of self-betrayal it had broken out, to be damped down as vigorously as before, when its unlawful passion stung too sharply. But now, when there was no sin in the feeling there was no shame in the confession. And Lady Elizabeth was too sincere not to know herself, and too strong in her essential purity to be afraid of the truth.

The fickle skies of our untrustworthy summers were for once favourable to concerted plans, and no day could have been more lovely than this of the young people's fête. The heaven was cloudless, save for a few wisps and curls of vapour that softened the glare ; and the south wind that stirred the leaves and made them 'sweet to hear,' like those oak-leaves on Helvellyn, brought the sense of freshness which prevented the summer heat from becoming too oppressive. There was just wind enough to lift the flags away from the masts, and shake them into life and movement—to carry the scents of the rarer and sweeter flowers in gusts of special perfume that were as the high lights in a picture—the dominant notes in a melody—the accentuation of a scheme of colour. The whole thing was pure perfection ; and man and nature met in strangely complete harmoniousness. From the one, sorrow seemed to be banished for evermore—to the other, storm and tempest seemed a state impossible to come again. It was a day wherein to live was good—a day when no one ought to weep or die.

The park was thronged with holiday-makers in their hundreds. They had come from all parts of the county and beyond, determined to enjoy themselves after the manner of the British Philistine—God save his rude and thick-skinned soul!—not abashed by sentimental regard for æsthetic rules. Loud laughter, louder cheers, broke through that indescribable hum of human voices heard from afar—so like and yet so unlike the hum of bees within a hive or in the lime-blossoms overhead. Spots and stripes and lines of colour moved across the grass, or wound in and out the clumps of trees set in groups about the park; and distance gave the gay gowns and ribbons of the women a chromatic value not to be found on nearer view. Little children played and ran, and fell like balls indued with will; and not the least interesting of the various parts composing the living picture were these small creatures given up to enjoyment like so many birds or lambs. Here a spangled juggler flashed his knives in the sun, or sent up his golden balls as quick as showers of light; there a Punch's show squeaked the old

deathless drama and rattled out modern tunes on the Arcadian pipes; here a group of fine-limbed acrobats showed their strength and muscle; and there a merry-go-round tried who could longest resist dizziness and sea-sickness. And here, again, some with appetites sharper set than the rest, had found a convenient dining-room somewhere in the shade, and were emptying their handkerchiefs and lightening their baskets with the gusto of the hunger that is born of pleasure.

Lady Elizabeth and her father were standing on the terrace that dominated the garden and looked over to the park. Lady Kingshouse was within. Not even on such a summer's day as this did she adventure much into the open air; and her embroidery had become to her by now what all hobbies become—her very life.

‘I suppose Anthony Harford will come over,’ said Lord Kingshouse suddenly.

He and his daughter had been standing quite silent for some little time, both apparently watching the scene, and each thinking of something else.

‘I suppose so,’ answered Lady Elizabeth.

Her cheeks flushed just as much as if a handful of monthly roses had been held near them and the sun had thrown the reflection of their colour on her face.

‘Ah! that marriage of his was a blunder,’ said my lord with a sigh for the one part, a shrug for the other.

‘It was a pity,’ she answered.

‘That poor misguided girl!’ he continued.
‘I was deuced sorry for her all through.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Elizabeth; ‘she suffered as much as he; perhaps more than he.’

‘If we had not had that dinner, Delight, it might never have come to pass,’ said the earl meditatively. ‘I have often thought how strangely great things come about by small causes. That dinner to have ruled the destinies of three people!’

‘Yes,’ she said.

And she said no more. She found the conversation difficult.

Just then they saw a horseman come along the park-road which ran below the garden-wall.

It was a cross kind of road, made for the convenience of the family when their business lay to the east and not to the south or west. It was the road which gave on to the highway leading to Thrift.

‘That looks uncommonly like Harford!’ said the earl.

‘I think so too,’ said Lady Elizabeth, who knew that it was he.

And then the horseman, seeing them, took off his hat and settled the question of his identity. In a few minutes more they heard his voice in the room behind them, talking to Lady Kingshouse and expressing his pleasure at seeing her again.

The earl stepped back out of the sunshine into the cool shadow of the room. Lady Elizabeth turned half round in the attitude of a person expectant but not too avid—with a welcome ready when claimed, but not thrust forward with too much insistence. Her lips were parted into a smile which had in it the crisp lines of pain as well as the frankness of pleasure; and her eyes were dilated till their tender grey was

transformed to black. Anthony shook hands with Lord Kingshouse, and repeated the cordial phrases he had used to the countess, but he saw only Lady Elizabeth as she stood on the terrace, half in profile and all in sunlight—her eyes turned to the park, while her heart and senses were in the room. Then, the rightful amount of attention bestowed on the authorities, Anthony came out on to the terrace—the hands of the two friends met—and his eyes looked into hers with that long searching look which seemed as if it would scan her very soul and be never weary of what it saw.

It was not Anthony's way to be hilarious. Let his mirth be ever so strong, it was deep rather than broad, and always more quiet than demonstrative. Those who knew him best would have seen most clearly how he enjoyed all the circumstances of the day, while ever maintaining his ordinary demeanour of self-restraint and the repose which goes with dignity. He went out of his way, more than once, to show the Smythe Smiths the sympathy of a neighbour and a fellow-landowner with all

they had planned and done ; and he congratulated them on the success of their fête, and even carried the beauty of the day to the good of their account—as if the skies had been swept clear by their besoms and the south wind had been blown through their bellows. He was the very acme of amiability—the very perfection of kindly courtesy ; and everyone said how brave Squire Harford looked to-day—the first day, indeed, that he did not seem to be haunted by his poor wife's ghost.

He did not laugh ; he did not joke ; he did not make sly grimaces expressive of his ebullient spirits ; but he impressed them all with the sense of his hidden joy, and Mrs. Symthe Smith, for all her pre-occupation with her own concerns, said once to her husband, in a meaning whisper : ‘ What has come to Anthony Harford ? He looks as if he had met an angel by the way ! ’

‘ Perhaps he did,’ said her husband, who knew as well as she how things stood.

So the glad day passed, and then Anthony left for the hour, and more, that it would take

him to ride back to Thrift and return to Upperfold clothed as a Christian gentleman should be for a dinner and a ball. No word had been said, but Lady Elizabeth's heart was full of that joy which has its other name in fear. He had looked so much—he had made her feel so much; and surely he was not the kind of man to wilfully mislead and cruelly betray! He had made her feel that he loved her—that she could give him back his lost happiness, and replace the absent in his heart. And what more does a true woman ask than to be of good service to the man she loves? He had deceived her once unwittingly, or rather she had deceived herself; but this time surely she was not following a marsh-light! Surely he loved her, and would prize her love for him! She was no mere childish ingénue who does not realize her own sensations. She was a woman who understood life—save in such forms of vice and vileness as come but rarely into a good woman's province to understand at all.

The dinner passed, as such functions always do—in enjoyment for the sympathetic; in bore-

dom for the unsympathetic ; in excitement for the young ; in bliss or despair for the secretly loving as they chanced to be placed or mated. To Anthony and Lady Elizabeth it was a time of pleasure beyond the reach of words, for they were together—and that was enough.

As the evening wore on, the ball began ; the garden was illuminated ; the fireworks flung up columns of flames which came down in showers of stars. All the guests left the ball-room and gathered on the terraces, looking at the glow-worm like lamps among the flowers, and the splendour of those artificial asteroids falling like golden rain from heaven. Many a word was whispered in that balmy, moonless, perfumed night which would never have been said in the day ; and many a rash caress was given, for weal or woe, as the chance of fortune might prove.

Under the shadow of the thick trellis that led to the rose-garden, Anthony and Lady Elizabeth stood as they had stood on that fateful day in his study, by the table where he had laid his revolver. His arms were round her waist ; her

hands were on his shoulders ; but his face was closer to hers than it had been then, and his voice was sweeter, as he asked, with a lover's insatiable insistence :

‘ Tell me again, oh you Delight, that you love me !’

‘ I do,’ she said gently. ‘ I always have.’

He pressed her to him fondly.

‘ At last the long night is over,’ he said. ‘ The day is breaking, and our sun of happiness has risen.’

THE END.

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